CEMETERY DANCE

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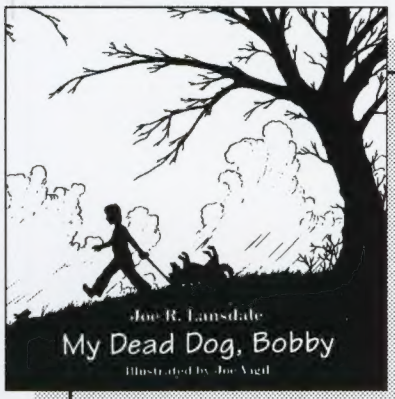

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WORDS FROM THE EDITOR

RICHARD T. CHIZMAR

CEMETERY DANCE #22 — Welcome back to another issue of *Cemetery Dance*, the magazine of dark mystery, suspense, and horror. If you have picked us up from a book or specialty store and are reading us for the first time . . . we hope you enjoy this issue enough to subscribe or keep an eye out for the Spring Issue, due in retail stores by the end of March.

* *

Brand new publication schedule:
(Ship Dates)

Spring Issue: March 15
Summer Issue: June 15
Fall Issue: September 15
Winter Issue: December 15

* *

Most long-time readers of *Cemetery Dance* know that this issue — issue #22 — is the first to be published in over a year. Issue #21 was the Summer 1994 edition, released late last August. Up to that point, we had published 21 issues of the magazine, right on schedule, a feat spanning six years. So what caused the hiatus?

In case you *don't* know the story, here it is: In September of last year, I was diagnosed with cancer. The doctors caught it early and, after two operations (small one in September, major one in October), I was considered in remission with a one percent chance of recurrence. When you're dealing with the "Big C" you just don't get better odds.

So we put out the good word and planned for the return of *Cemetery Dance* in the Winter.

Good thing I don't gamble.

Wouldn't you know it — that one percent came back and bit me right in the you-know-what. And it was hungry. The cancer returned in mid-March with a vengeance. In my lungs, liver, stomach, lymph nodes. The odds had dropped drastically — to 50%.

A flip of a coin.

We immediately began a very intense program of chemotherapy (a twelve weeker), and after six weeks, my blood markers had returned to normal and I was on my way back. We thought of returning to the magazine late in the Summer, but knowing the toll that chemo takes on body and soul, we decided to wait until the Winter Issue before coming back.

As of the day I am writing this — mid-November — I am one week short of reaching the six month mark (of having normal blood markers).

I'm back.

And, I'm delighted and proud to report, *Cemetery Dance* is back, too!

* *

A heartfelt "thank you" to each and every reader who took the time to send along their well-wishes. Over the past year, I have received dozens and dozens of cards, get well gifts, prayer and mass cards, inspirational books and tapes . . . you name it, I got it. I heard from folks who had cancer and beat it, from people who knew others with the disease (some who made it and some who didn't), and from readers who just felt compelled to write in and express their thoughts. All were anxious to see the magazine back in print, but all were very clear in saying: "Don't come back too soon. Don't rush it."

Words cannot even begin to describe the strength I drew from these communications, but I want each and every one of you to know this: I truly felt (and continue to feel) blessed to have so many people thinking of me and praying for me. You told me that *Cemetery Dance* has touched your lives, made you feel as though I were part of your family. Well, I promise you that *you all* have touched my life in a way that I'll never, ever forget and I'll always consider you a member of my family.

* *

Due to my illness and the resulting delay in publishing, some of the information/reviews in this jumbo issue — the biggest ever at 144 pages! — are slightly dated. We take a lot of pride in being able to deliver timely news, reviews, and interviews in each issue, and all future issues will continue to reflect this policy.

* *

That's all for now. It's time to enjoy the issue. And please remember that Ingram Periodicals is *Cemetery Dance's* newsstand distributor. If you frequent a chain store — yes, *any* chain store — or an independent book or comic store, please ask the manager to carry *Cemetery Dance*. Thanks — we appreciate the help!

Now turn down the lights, flip the page, take my hand, and start the dance . . .

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THE RIFLE

JACK KETCHUM

JACK KETCHUM is probably best known as the author of the cult horror classic, *The Off Season*. But more recent blockbusters such as *Joyride*, *Red*, *Only Child*, and *Stranglehold* have earned him the tagline of "horror's fastest rising star." Ketchum's last appearance in *Cemetery Dance* ("The Box" from issue #20) won the 1994 Bram Stoker Award for Best Short Story.

She found the rifle standing on its stock in the back of his cluttered closet.

Unexpected as a snake in there.

Not that he'd made very much attempt to hide it. It was leaning in the corner behind the twenty-pound fiberglass bow and the quiver of target arrows his father had bought him for Christmas — over her objections. His winter jacket hung in front of it. She'd moved the jacket aside. And there it was.

He'd complained in the past about her going in his closet and for a long time she'd obliged him. Privacy, she knew, was important to a ten-year-old — it was especially important to Danny. But when you noticed dustballs rolling out from under the door *somebody* was going to have to get in there and clean and obviously it wasn't going to be him.

She was only planning to vacuum.

Now this.

She reached around behind her and turned off the Electrolux. For a moment she just knelt there staring at the rifle in the heavy summer silence.

A slim black barrel lurking in the shadows.

A secret, she thought.

Yet another.

She reached inside and grasped the cool metal. Drew it out into the light.

The rifle was an old bolt-action .22. Her brother had owned one very much like it when he was fifteen — took it down to the VFW target range on Saturdays for a while. Then he discovered girls.

Danny was only ten.

Where in god's name had he got it?

Richard wouldn't have bought it for him. Not even her ex-husband was fool enough to think for one minute that she'd allow a weapon in the house. No, it had to be . . .

. . . *her father's.*

Which meant that Danny had also stolen it.

They'd visited his farm the weekend before last. She was struck again by how empty the house seemed now that her mother was gone and had sat in the kitchen with her father drinking cup after cup of black coffee, knowing how starved for conversation he was now. So that Danny was on his own most of the day. Through the big bay window she saw him go into the barn where her father kept his two remaining horses. A little later noticed him walking through the field of long dry grass toward the woods and stream beyond. And then she'd forgotten all about him until what must have been over an hour had passed and he came slamming in through the screen door with a big box turtle in his hand, Danny all excited until she told him to put it back by the stream where he'd found it, that they weren't taking a turtle all the way back to Connecticut with them and that was that.

Her father kept his newer guns behind glass on a rack in the living room.

The older ones, the ones he never used anymore, were stacked in the workshop of the cellar.

She examined the stock. It was scratched and pitted. Her sinuses were giving her hell this summer and she could barely smell a thing but she sniffed it anyway. It smelled of earth and mold. It was her father's, all right. She sniffed again, the scent of old gun oil on her hands. Probably he hadn't used it in years.

It would be months before her father noticed it was missing. If then.

She threw the bolt. Inside a brass shell casing gleamed.

She felt a sudden mix of shock and fury.

My god.

He'd *loaded* the goddamn thing.

Her father would *never* have left it loaded. That meant that Danny had searched around the basement for shells as well. And found some. *How many more did he have? Where were they?*

She resisted the urge to go tearing through his drawers, rummaging through his closet.

That could wait.

What she needed to do now was find him and confront him. One more confrontation. More and more as he got older.

She wondered how he'd explain *this* away.

It was not going to be like stealing Milky Ways from the Pathmark Store.

It was not going to be like the fire he and Billy Berendt had set, yet denied they'd set, in the field behind the Catholic Church last year.

He couldn't lie his goddamn way out of this one.

Couldn't say that he'd meant to pay for the candy bars but didn't because he got to looking at the comic books and forgot they were in his pocket. He couldn't claim that the two eyewitnesses — kids from the rougher part of town who'd seen Billy and Danny go into the field and then come out running and laughing just before smoke appeared on the horizon — had it in for him.

The rifle was concrete. The bullet even more so.

They did not lend themselves to easy explanation.

It was not going to be like the jackknife from Nowhere or the brand-new Sega-Genesis computer game from Nowhere or the Bic cigarette lighters that kept cropping up which he'd always *found on the street.* What a lucky kid.

She was angry. She was scared.

Angry and scared enough so that her hands were shaking as she removed the shell from the breech and put it in her jeans pocket. She felt a by-now all-too-familiar access of what could only be called grief, a feeling that even though her son was only ten she'd already lost him somehow, as though there were something in him she could no longer touch or speak to and for which mourning was easily as justifiable and as appropriate as her father's grief over the loss of her mother.

She knew it was important to push that feeling aside. To let the anger flow freely instead. She needed the anger. Otherwise too much love and loss, too much sympathy and — *let's face it* — too much plain old-fashioned self-pity would only weaken her.

Tough love, she thought. That's what's left.

She'd tried the shrinks. Tried the counsellors. She'd tried to understand him.

Taking things away from him, privilages — the computer, TV, the movies — was the only thing that seemed to work anymore.

Not even that sometimes.

Well, they're all going out the window today. Everything.

She slid the black bolt of the rifle back into position and marched on out of the room. She knew where to find him.

At the clubhouse.

The grass in her back yard tickled her ankles. It was time to cut the lawn again. Humidity made the stock of the rifle feel sticky in her hand. She slid between the two pine trees in back of the lawn out onto the well-worn path into the woods.

The path belonged to the boys. Billy Berendt, Danny, Charlie Haas and the others. She never came back this way. Hardly ever. Only when she was calling him for supper and he was late and didn't answer — even then she rarely had to venture this far. The path was only two feet wide at most through thick, waist-high brush, dry brown grass and briars as tall as she was. A path the width of a boy's body — not the width of her's. She was glad of the jeans — already studded with burrs — and unhappy with the short-sleeve blouse. A thorn bush scored two thin lines of blood along her upper arm. She used the barrel of the rifle to part another.

She heard the stream rushing over its rocky bed through a line of trees to her left. The path split ahead of her. She took it to the right, away from the stream.

All these woods would one day be developed, bulldozed into oblivion. But in the three years they'd lived here that hadn't happened yet — and Danny was getting to the age where soon it wouldn't matter. In the meantime the woods and stream were part of the reason she'd wanted the place for him.

Nature, she believed, was a teacher. She'd grown up on a farm and thought that most of what she knew about life she'd glimpsed there first and then had come to understand more fully later. Birth, death, sex, the renewal of the land, its fragility and its power, the chaos inside the order, the changes in people that came with the change of seasons. The impacability of the natural world and how important it was simply to accept that.

She wanted all this for Danny.

What she'd had. And what now sustained her.

She knew that many women would have been bitter about a broken marriage that they hadn't chosen to end. But she wasn't. Not really. Unhappy, yes, of course — but there had never really been any bitterness. Love, she thought, was a contract you signed knowing that someday the signatures might fade. Richard had fallen out of love with her and in love with someone else. A simple change of seasons. Hard as winter, but bearable and somehow even understandable. It was no longer necessary to the scheme of things that people mate for life. Reality was what it was and couldn't be changed by her own distress in the face of it. She thought Richard's choice of second partners was one he someday might live to regret. But that was his affair. She'd let him go.

And she might have been bitter about Danny too. Instead she simply kept plugging away. Though the boy was far from easy. He'd *never* been easy. But since the breakup four years ago he always seemed, if not actually *in* trouble, always on the verge of it. Sliding grades. Clowning, fighting in class. Bad language around the girls at school. Once he'd been caught throwing stones at Charlie Haas on the playground.

And of course there were the stealing and brushfire incidents.

Beyond paying child-support his father was no help at all. Richard thought it was all typical boy behavior. It would pass, he said. She'd never been a boy and it was possible he was right.

But Richard didn't have to live with him.

Didn't have to endure the tantrums when he didn't get his way or the hostile silences.

She felt exhausted by him sometimes.

What more could a kid get into?

He could get into firearms, obviously.

At age ten.

Great. Just great.

She wondered how he'd smuggled it home in the first place and then remembered the blanket she kept in back of the station wagon. He could have hidden a box of dynamite back there and she'd never have known it.

Very cute, Danny. Very sneaky. Very neat.

Her arms felt sticky with sweat, itchy from the pollen and dust in the air and the warm brush of leaves. She could barely breathe for all the damn pollen.

But she was nearly there now.

She could see its location in the distance to the right of the path, up a hill through a tall thin stand of birch.

His clubhouse. His personal sanctuary.

Aside from the occasional visit from Billy Berendt, inviolate to the world.

Until today.

Once, perhaps a hundred years ago, there had been a house here but it had long since burned to the ground — leaving only the root cellar — and whoever the owners were they'd never rebuilt it. He'd taken her up to look at it, all excited, shortly after they moved in and he first discovered it. At that time it was nothing but a hole in the ground five feet by eight feet wide and four feet deep, overgrown with weeds. But he'd cleared the weeds to expose the fieldstone walls and raw earth floor within and, with her permission, begged a pair of old double doors from her father's barn, and he and Richard had spent one uncommonly ambitious afternoon painting the two doors green and sinking hinges into the walls and then attaching the doors so that they covered the hole and could be secured together by a combination padlock from the outside and a simple hook and eye from the inside.

Total privacy.

He called it his clubhouse.

His private little gathering of one.

She had always thought it was kind of sad. Possibly not even good for him.

But Danny had always been a loner. She guessed that was his nature. He always seemed to tolerate the other neighborhood boys more than he actually befriended them — though for some reason they all seemed to like him well enough and were eager to get him out to play even though they were exluded from the clubhouse and were probably jealous that Danny'd discovered it first. For some reason that didn't seem to matter. Maybe the place imparted status of some kind. She didn't know. Boys, she thought.

All she knew was that he spent a lot of time here. More than she'd have liked.

She'd bought him a battery-powered lantern. Not much light got in through the doors, he said. A step-ladder for going up and down. Toys and books and games would disappear and then reappear in his room as well as mason jars from the kitchen and hammers and boxes of nails from the toolbox so she knew he was bringing them out here and then returning them according to some private agenda.

She never pried.

But now she was going to have to take all this away from him too for a while.

She leaned on the rifle, catching her breath before starting in on the remaining trek up the slope of the hill. She heard bees buzzing in the grass beside her.

Her sinuses were killing her.

Warm wind ruffled her hair. She steeled herself for what was to come and headed on.

The doors had weathered considerably since last she'd seen them. They could seriously use another paint job. She saw that the combination lock was gone. That meant he had it with him. He was inside.

"Danny."

No answer. She listened. No movement either.

"Danny. I know you're in there."

She reached down for the doorhandles and rattled the doors.

"Come out here. Now."

She was starting to get seriously angry again. *Good,* she thought. You damn well *should* be angry.

"I said now. Did you hear me?"

"You're not supposed to be here."

"What?"

"I said you're not supposed to be here. You never come out here."

"Well that's too bad because I'm here now. Do I have to kick these doors apart or what?"

She heard a click and the rattle of glass and then steps on the ladder. She heard him unfasten the hook and the door creaked open.

He slid through the doors, out of the dark below, and let the doors fall shut behind him. There was something furtive about him. Something she didn't like. He knelt and took the padlock out of his pocket.

"Leave it," she said. "Stand up. Look at me."

He did as he was told. And saw the rifle. Glanced at it once and then turned away.

"Where did you get this?"

He didn't answer. He just kept staring down the hill, arms folded across his skinny chest.

"It's your grampa's, isn't it."

No answer to that one either.

"You stole it, didn't you."

"I was going to put it back," he said. *Sullen. Caught.* "Next time we went there."

"Oh really? Were you going to put this back too?"

She took the bullet from her pocket and held it out to him.

"Or were you planning to use it?"

He sighed, staring down the hill.

"You have more of these?"

He nodded.

"Where?"

"My drawer."

She looked at him. Her son. Her son who wouldn't meet her eyes.

"You're in big trouble. You know that, don't you."

He sighed again and then bent down with the padlock in his hand to secure the double doors.

She remembered the way he'd opened them, just wide enough to slide through and no further.

"Leave it," she said. "What's down there?"

"Just my stuff."

"What stuff. You have some more surprises for me?"

"No."

"Open it up. I want to see."

"Mom . . . it's *my* stuff."

"As of today you don't *have* any stuff. Not until I say you do. Do you understand me? Now open it."

"Mom!"

"Open it!"

He stood there. *He isn't going to move,* she thought.

Why you little sonova . . .

"God dammit!"

She reached down and threw open one door and then the other and the first thing that hit her was the smell even *with* her sinus problem, the smell was rank and old and horrible beyond belief, and the second thing was the incredible clutter of rags and jars and buckets on the floor and the third was what she saw on the walls, hanging there from masonry nails pounded into the fieldstone, hung like decorations, like trophies, like the galleries she'd seen in castles in Scotland and England on her honeymoon and which were hunter's galleries. A boy's awful parody of that.

His stuff.

She gagged and put her hand to her mouth and dropped the bullet. She stooped reflexively to pick it up again.

She looked at him, hoping that her knees wouldn't buckle.

Hoping crazily in a way that he wouldn't even be there.

He was staring directly at her. The first time since he'd climbed out of the root cellar. The expression on his face was neutral but the look in his eyes was not. The eyes were examining her coldly, intent on her reaction.

As perhaps they had examined coldly what was down below.

Adult eyes. But not the eyes of any adult she'd ever seen or ever dreamt to see.

Was this her son?

For a moment she felt a stunning terror of him. Of this little boy who didn't even weigh ninety pounds yet. Who still balked at showering every day and washing his hair on schedule. It was a terror that skittered suddenly inside her and seemed to awaken all her memories of him at once, memories like claps of thunder — the stealing, the stone-throwing, the fire, the dark half-hidden glances, the bullying tantrums — terror that suddenly gave pattern to all this, all the interstices of understanding and *seeing* suddenly closing together for her to compose a black seamless wall of events and behavior which defined him.

And *she knew.*

She looked into his eyes and saw what he was.

And knew what he would become.

She reeled under the weight of it. Ten years of life.

When had it begun? At the breast?

In the womb?

She needed to know the whole of it, needed to embrace the horror of this as she had always needed his embrace. However cold. However distant.

She had always needed to embrace her son.

"You have a light . . . down there?" she murmured.

He nodded.

Her voice faltered. Then, *"Go turn it on,"* she said.

He preceeded her down the ladder and switched on the lantern. The room was suddenly very bright.

She stood in his chamber and looked at the walls.

The box turtle — *had he smuggled it here from her father's house too or was this a different one and how many others? what about before he found the clubhouse? what about . . . ?* The turtle was nailed to the wall by its feet. Its shriveled head lolled back onto its greying shell. The frogs were impaled by a single nail through roughly the center of their bodies and there were six of them. Some belly-up, some not. She saw a pair of withered garter snakes, three crayfish. And a salamander.

Like the turtle the cats were nailed through all fours. He had eviscerated both of them and looped

their entrails around them and nailed the entrails to the wall at intervals so that the cats were at the center of a kind of crude bulls'eye. She saw that he had strangled them with some sort of rope or twine. He had nearly taken off the head of the larger one in doing so. Its black-and-white fur was caked with old dried blood.

The other was just a kitten.

A tabby.

She was aware of him watching her.

She was aware too of the tears in her eyes and knew what he didn't know — that the tears were for her. Not for him. Not this time. She wiped them away.

She had heard of people like this. Read about them. Saw them on the evening news. It seemed they were everywhere these days.

She knew what they were. And what they were not.

She had not expected her son to be one of them.

Her son was ten. Only ten. She saw all the years of his life ahead of him. So many years.

So much death to come.

Treatment, she thought. He needs treatment. He needs help.

But they did not respond to treatment.

"I'm going back up," she murmured. Her voice sounded flat and strange to her and she wondered if it did to him and then wondered if it was the fieldstone walls and earthen floor that made her voice sound the way it did or if it was something inside her, some sea-change in her that was expressing itself now in this new strange voice.

She thought, *implacable.*

She moved up the step ladder and stepped out into the field and heard him snap off the lantern below as she threw the bolt on the rifle and inserted the bullet into the chamber. He looked up at her once just as he was near the top and she saw that no, there was nothing to save in his nature and she fired into his left eye and he fell back into the root cellar. She closed the double doors.

She would have to return the rifle to her father's. She would have to distract him somehow and put it back in his workshop where it belonged.

And then she would call . . . whoever.

Another missing boy.

Sooner or later they'd find him, the combination padlock in his pocket and they'd wonder. Who would do such a thing?

Such things.

Those things on the walls.

My god.

How had it happened?

It was a question she would ask herself, she thought, for a great many seasons after, as spring plunged into sweltering summer, as fall turned to winter again and the coldness of heart and mind set in for its long terrible duration.

— *CD*

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CHARLES L. GRANT

RAMBLINGS FROM THE DARK #24

On Willie Nelson, Judy McMahon, Dreams, Nightmares, Critics, True Love, and That Which Man Is Not Meant To Know:

Here's how it works. Once in a while. Sometimes.

Writing is a compulsion, something just shy of full-blown obsession.

It can no more be turned off just because the clock reaches a certain hour than Victoria Falls can be reduced to a trickle by the twitch of a miraculous faucet.

It can no more be distracted by a good book or rip-snorting movie than a hurricane can be tamed by a few puny airplanes dropping chemicals into its maelstrom.

It can no more be forgotten than you can forget the name of your first love, even if that was forty years ago.

If you're lucky, it happens, and there's not a damn thing you can do about it.

Judy McMahon, by the way. Lincoln Junior High School. Kearny, New Jersey. Her father's name was Mike and had a hellacious Hudson sedan, and she lived a ways down the street from Roosevelt (grammar) School. We used to go square-dancing at my father's church on Friday nights. Once in a while, I called a dance myself. Usually, "San Antonio Rose". It happened because I was the priest's kid, not because I was any good. She had curly black hair and freckles, and her sister (who was a lot taller than Judy) and my brother (who is a lot taller than I) dated for a while, when they reached junior high.

Just in case you were wondering.

And no, I haven't the faintest idea what happened to her. I just hope she's happy.

Me, I eventually became a damn writer.

*

Writing is something you do when you're awake, when you're sleeping, when you're eating, when you're driving, when you're waiting for the boarding call at the airport or train station, when you're washing dishes, when you're walking the dog or trying to brush the cat, when you're in deep serious conversation with your best friend, when you're trying like hell to get out of a boring conversation with someone you know and wish lived on a different continent (preferably in the Southern Hemisphere), when you're in the john, when you're brushing your teeth, when you're trying to remember what you were supposed to pick up at the grocery store and wonder if you can get away with faking it, when you're at the dentist's office, when you're at your son's graduation or your daughter's sweet sixteen party, when you're lying in bed and can't sleep and there are familiar sounds inside and out that you can't quite put your finger on.

Writing is something I do when I'm breathing.

*

There's a saying: "Writing is easy, typing is hard."

No. Only sort of. Typing is hard only when you can't type fast enough, or handwrite fast enough, to get it all down before you forget what you wanted to say. It's a race of aching desperation, because no matter how good your memory is or how fast your fingers are, it's never good enough.

Ever.

And if you do forget it, there's no guarantee you'll ever remember it again.

Which is why you type as fast as you can.

It's like trying to stem the flow of blood from a severed jugular.

You can slow it down a little, but damn, you can't *ever* get it to stop.

Every time I write, I die a little.

*

Sooner or later, your insurance agent or your grade school teacher or your drill sergeant or your priest or rabbi or your beat cop or your congressman or the guy who put the wheels on your new car will get to retire.

You won't.

Ever.

It may be that you'll not be able to sell anything anymore, and it may be that you won't be able to stop writing what you already wrote, and it may be that you become so infirm that you won't be able to put words on paper.

But you'll never stop writing.

Ever.

As long as there's a single electric spark left in your brain, as long as you still have dreams, as long as you still believe in the virtue of a good story well told, you'll still be at it.

Always.

I figure it'll say on my tombstone: "Still at it. Call my agent."

*

There is not now, nor was there ever, nor will there ever be, a real answer to the undying question, "Where do you get your ideas?"

What they really want to know, even if they don't know how to ask the question, is where you get your inspiration for the ideas you already have, floating somewhere back there in the labyrinth of your mind, or for the ideas that are waiting to be born, somewhere in a place that has no name and has no map and has no reason to exist except the fact that you will it to be so.

Inspiration is infinite in its sources; there isn't enough Time in the universe for you to list them all; and they range from the profound to the . . . profound.

There are no trite sources if the story is written, and the story is well done, and the story lives.

There are no trite sources if the story stinks, and just lies there on the paper, gasping for a breath you have no idea how to give it.

There are no trite sources if you are excited enough to put but a single word down.

Anyone who tells you differently is either a damn liar, or someone who hasn't a clue what it's like to be a writer but thinks he does because it gives him an excuse not to get a day job.

Which is why I don't mind when people laugh every time I tell them I've written stories based on lines from Willie Nelson songs, or lines from Shelley's poetry, or lines from a "concept" album by Emmylou Harris, or the sight of children teasing each other in a neighbor's yard, or the Bill Forsyth film, "Gregory's Girl," plus a poster of a black panther in my office, or the day I was fired from teaching because

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my department chairman figured that, after ten years, I didn't know what the hell I was doing.

People can laugh all they want.

I still write the stories.

*

There is only limited truth to the oft-given instruction that you must write what you know. To follow that precept blindly is to invite the death of your imagination, swift or otherwise.

Writing is not parochial, it is catholic.

What you must know are people; the rest you can look up.

*

The talent involved in writing is not in the creation of story ideas, for how many of you have made up bedtime stories for your children, or have come up with the perfect excuse why your homework isn't done or you're late getting home; the talent lies in the ability to integrate those ideas into a story, however it is told, so that the reader, for the moment of reading, believes in the world, however real or fanciful, you have created.

Having talent, by the way, is not the same as having genius.

It also does not imply that, as a writer, you are perfectly capable of judging the worth of your own work. You may be able to recognize its major flaws (which you can correct immediately), and most of its minor flaws (which you can correct after you've let the story sit for a few days), but there's no honest way you can say, immodestly or not, that what you have written is superior, whether to someone else's work or to your own. That judgment comes from the readers.

Readers create classics, not critics.

Critics, whether they admit it or not (and most of the time, they don't) are, by the nature of the fact that they are just as human as you, severely blinded by the same political and cultural biases and prejudices as are the writers and the readers. But the readers are more honest about it because they don't have a reputation at stake, or to make, or a financial stake in the writing of criticism.

They know what they like, and who the hell cares why.

Criticizing a story (which is not, I hasten to add, the same as reviewing one) is a lot like trying to answer the question, "Why do you love me?" An honest man would say, "I don't know, I just do." Most of us, however, in the mistaken belief that the answer is somehow an urgent matter of survival, start making a list.

The problem is: the longer the list, the more you leave out.

The more you leave out, the more love dies.

Let talent do what it must.

Let those who would dissect it begin with themselves.

*

Here's how it works. Once in a while. Sometimes.

When you write, when you create, when you give in to the inspiration and the compulsion, you are, completely and absolutely, *alone*, and it doesn't make any difference how many other people or distractions are in the room with you.

You are alone, and no one cares but you.

You are alone until the moment you send the story to its editor, and then you are more alone than ever.

As a father gives his daughter away at her wedding, as a mother sends her son off into the world at last, you send the story away; and as the editors carp and the readers sneer or cheer and the critics lift their judgements on tablets made of sand and the bookstore displays you in a dusty corner in the shadows, all you can ever do to diminish the sorrow and joy is take another breath . . .

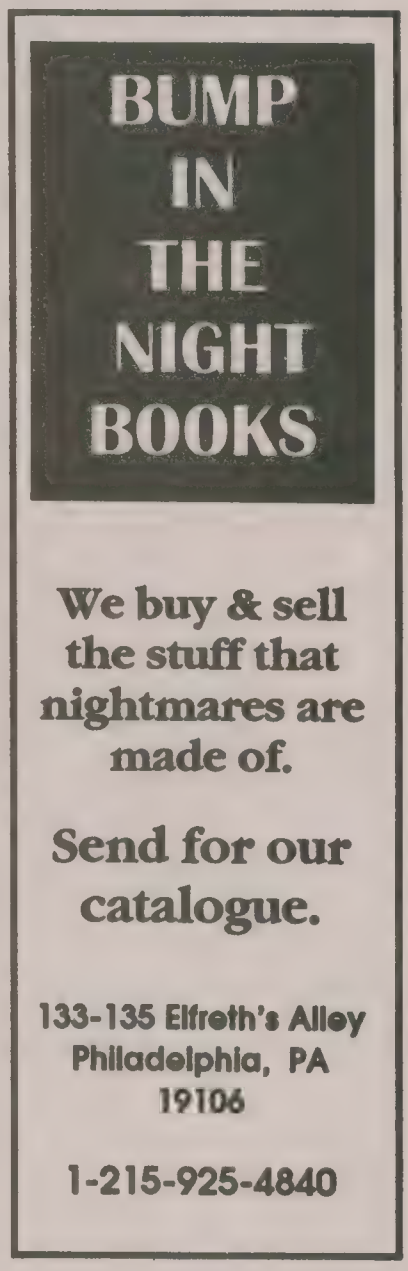
. . . and carry on.

If you do anything else, you're not a writer at all.

You're a fraud.

*

That's how it works.
Not once in a while.
Always.



THOMAS F. MONTELEONE

THE MOTHERS AND FATHERS ITALIAN ASSOCIATION

Hey, Guys, I've Got a Swell Idea! Let's Put On A Show . . . and a Murrrrrder.

Well, it's been a while since I have been able to talk to all of you in these pages. Lots of things have been happening in your own lives as well as mine. And of course our benefactor, Editor Chizmar. Despite some delays, things are back on track and I will try to entertain and inform you with my usual aplomb.

I have been very busy, so maybe I should catch you up on developments: *Borderlands 4*, edited by Elizabeth and me, was published in late Fall 94, and to date has received unanimously excellent reviews. The preliminary ballot for the Stoker Awards listed five stories from the anthology—more than any other source of new fiction in 1994. Also, in November, my new novel from Warner, entitled *The Resurrectionist*, a suspense/thriller that has already garnered advance raves and a strikingly original, eye-catching cover will be appearing in bookstores and I am expecting very good things for it. There is already some big movie interest, so I'll keep you posted on developments. Speaking of movies, my last novel *The Blood of the Lamb* remains under option to Blue Turtle Films, who has been faxing and mailing me their treatments and communications in an effort to hire one of the best screenwriters in L. A. As I write this, I am about 100 pages into my new novel, *Night of Broken Souls*. More on this as it develops.

But enough about me, let's get into the topic for the day. And the topic is . . . about *me!* Well, not exactly, it's more like how to have a really good time on a weekend without going to a convention. Let me tell you what Elizabeth and I did on the very last weekend in March . . .

The adventure actually began months ago when we planned the trip with F. Paul and Mary Wilson, Matt and Ann Costello, and Steve and Nancy Spruill. We decided to drive up to this hotel/inn/resort in upstate New York called the Mohonk Mountain House. We would spend the weekend trying to solve a "murder" that would take place in our midst. We had never heard of it, but Matt Costello assured us it was a lot of fun. So here's the deal. We drove up on Friday afternoon, through a little town on the Warkill River called New Paltz, New York, and followed the signs to Mohonk. There was a gatehouse, where resort personnel checked us off a guest list, then flagged us through. I followed a driveway up a steep, single lane, road that snaked up a thickly forested drive. Winding, treacherous hitchbacks, no guard rails and sheer-faced cliffs invited a bad turn of the wheel and a loooong plummet to a rocky end. Up and up, turning and turning, up the mountain and Elizabeth on more than one occasion said something like "All right so let's get there already!"

Suddenly, we turned sharply, clearing a copse of trees and we saw the place stretching before us. My first impression was The Overlook, from that book we all know. Rising up in front us like some massive fortification was a sprawling behemoth of varied architectures. The Mohonk Mountain House was a *huge* structure of turrets, balconies, widows' walks, tall windows, spires, gables and verandahs. A monstrously huge, utterly Gothic, impressively Victorian complex that huddled upon the edge of a gigantic ridge of glacial rock. Below its foundations and palisades waited a lake as cool and clear and primeval as any in all of literature. Only this one was real.

Elizabeth and I started laughing not because it's funny, but because the place was so damned incredibly *big*, and we felt puny and

insignificant as we drove into its late afternoon shadows.

As we approached the port-cochere, valets swarmed about the car, opening doors, grabbing luggage, and ushering us into a lobby full of arriving guests. The Mohonk Mountain House was as imposing and wondrous on the inside as on the outside. The place was full of wood. Polished wood, carved wood, filigreed wood. Wood ceilings, railings, and wainscoting. It was a hotel built as they are built no longer. We soon learned the building was 125 years old, a fact supported by hallways filled with sepia photos and realistic oils of the House's grounds accented by bridges, paths, and gazebos and peopled by faces long-dead. There was history here, a sense of times spent by idly rich gentlemen and their ladies. A place where time traveled more slowly and with more respect.

Our room faced the lake, five stories above, with a balcony and railing so low it could only be a testament to an era when everyone was a lot shorter. But Elizabeth has not noticed this yet. She was still in a kind of semi-shock, having just noticed there was no TV in the room. Not even a clockradio. This was going to be interesting, I think to myself.

We went downstairs to meet up with the rest of our crew. Everybody was very much into the spirit of the adventure, but we were surprised by the number of participants—somewhere around 300 hundred. A lot of people. The attraction for the weekend is called *Murder in the Rue Mohonk*, and basically it was a kind of running play, that takes places at the hotel in full view of the guests. Things were kicked off with a great dinner, and then an introduction of all the characters. I won't bore you with the details of the plot, other than to tell you that it involved a heretofore undiscovered novel manuscript by Edgar Allen Poe and a collection of literary types who descended upon Mohonk House to attend its auction. The manuscript turned up missing and one of the characters, a literary agent, was killed. All the characters have many reasons to be suspects, of course.

An added attraction: the literary characters in the murder drama were (surprise!) writers themselves—mystery writers who had their books, fans, and continuing "series characters." They were celebrities of a sort, although our team had only heard of a few of them. (This did not deter us from thinking they would have found us all notoriously famous, a belief that caused us to attend the weekend incognito—but more on this later)

The idea was to watch a little playlet, then attend a soireé where the characters were in attendance, listen to what they were saying, and start assembling clues. We all started out in earnest, trying to gather information, but there was a big problem for Matt, Paul, Steve, and me: being writers ourselves, we couldn't help see the flaws in the way the basic mystery had been presented and the clumsy, sometime illogical way the clues were to be obtained. Yeah, we analyzed the thing like writers, but can you blame us?

Here's an example. The 300 participants were divided into teams of maybe 15 people each (our group was combined with some older couples and team-name was the Tell-Tale Hearts), and each team received $5,000 in Play Money to buy items connected to Edgar Allen Poe at a Friday night auction. One of the items, we were told, had a clue attached to it that would help the team who acquired it in solving the mystery. And an intriguing set of clues they were: a steamer trunk, a marriage certificate, a cloche, a bowler hat, a ring, etc. Our team spent some time trying to figure out what item would most likely contain the clue—opting for the cloche or the marriage certificate (but we were overruled by the larger, older part of our team, who wanted the trunk). We felt the trunk was too obvious, but after the auction we found out that the clue was attached to one of the objects in a totally arbitrary fashion. In other words, it was like buying lottery tickets. Total luck. No logic. No intelligence. No chance for any of that good old ratiocination. So we stood around like fools for an hour bidding on objects that had no real connection to the mystery. They could have saved us all plenty of time by just drawing numbers out of a hat and giving the lucky number the clue. To tell you the truth, that kind of deflated our interest in the whole deal, but we figured we would see what Saturday brought.

And so, after breakfast, Elizabeth and I took a hike with Matt and Ann up a mountain path that wound around the lake, opposite the Mohonk House, all the way to a stone tower built at the summit around a 100 years ago. The wind was cold and it slapped us around like a dame in a bad Forties film, but the walk and the view were exhilarating. We returned to the hotel and spent an hour or so interrogating the suspects, each of whom had been assigned a meeting room where the teams could turn on their grills a bit. During the interrogations, a second person was murdered (poisoned right before our eyes!) and the plot, as they say, thickened.

But it really didn't. More on that later (in what is known as the *dénouement*, which is French for "the unraveling"). And I didn't learn that at this mystery week-end; having been the recipient of a Jesuit education, I already knew it.

Anyway, our crowd spent the afternoon talking and laughing and having a few drinks as we discussed the "case." At first, we decided we were having such a great

time just hanging out, it didn't matter if we got into the game, or whether we solved the murders. (Some of the other teams, with names like The Ravens, The Imps of the Perverse, and The Hop Frogs, were seen carrying notepads everywhere, and gathering in tight little circles of brow-knitted faces, all taking this thing *very seriously).* We decided we would give it one more chance, so we met with the rest of our group—we called them the Fiftysomethings—and assigned questions to be asked of each of the suspects. Before dinner we all split up and sweated our possible perps. And a funny thing happened, we all turned up little pieces of info that really helped, and we got into the spirit of the thing. While we were at dinner (and the food at this place was really fabulous) Steve Spruill, offered up a solution that not only seemed logical, it also provided us with a detailed sequence of events and proper, believable motivation for our suspect.

So, then, what was next? Sunday morning, all the teams would be gathered in the auditorium for a series of team presentations wherein everyone would be expected to offer up their solution. These presentations, Matt and Ann assured us, were sometimes elaborate. And so expecting some of the teams to be calling in set carpenters and storming the make-up trailers, we knew we would have to come up with a little shtick, a clever way of presenting our evidence and solution. Elizabeth and Ann came up with a seance idea, and Paul and the rest of us wrote a quick and facile little script over Sunday breakfast. We enlisted Ann to be the spirit voice of one of the victims, one of the Fiftysomethings to be the other victim's spirit voice, and another of their group, a nice older woman with a perfectly appropriate Eastern European accent to be the Medium. Sounds easy enough, right?

Okay, so the presentations were rolling along and the groups were called to the stage at random. We sat there as group after group is called and it is becoming obvious we will be one of the last ones. In the meantime, we were "treated" to all manner of the clever, the entertaining, the rankly amateur . . . and one presentation that was so incomprehensible, it was like watching theatre of the absurd (although this would have been better named theatre of the troglodytes).

And then we watched another group put on a seance that was in a word—impressive. Sounds effects (howling wind, rattling sheets of thunder, turgid organ music), and special effects (flashing lights, colors, and a levitating spirit of Edgar Allen Poe himself), plus masks and make-up. They asked Poe to give them the answers to the case, and he did. It was a hell of a good presentation; and Paul and Steve and I, standing in the back of the auditorium, looked at one another and simultaneously said "Oh shit . . ." We duck-walked up the aisle to the row of seats where Matt was sitting with all the wives and asked what-were-we-gonna-do-now. Then they announced that the Tell Tale Hearts (that's us) would be on deck . . .

Whatever we did, we would have to do it fast. So I nudged Paul Wilson, and said: just tell everybody we'll do our seance as planned and I'll open and close it with a "narrator." Everybody looked at me with grave doubt in their faces, but what the hell, they had no choice—we were only minutes away from embarrassing ourselves in front of 300 people. As we snuck back to our place at the rear of the auditorium, I filled in Paul and Steve on my plan and we quickly threw out some suggestions for an on-the-fly, seat-of-my pants script. As we did this, Elizabeth came to the back of the room to instruct me that (a) I am not funny and (b) let Paul do it. We sent back word that Paul would do it and again Elizabeth came scurrying back with a new message that (a) Mary said Paul couldn't do it and (b) we'd better think of something.

Then they were calling our group to the stage. I directed everybody to form a half-circle, sent Ann Costello off stage-right with a concealed mike and one of the Fiftysomethings off stage left with another hidden mike. To our Eastern European lady, I handed a third, while taking a fourth one for myself. Then I faced the audience and I launched into my best Peter Sellers-as-Inspector-Clouseau accent. If you haven't been treated to my Clouseau, I can only tell you it is quite accurate and very funny (and totally impossible to re-create in print).

So use you imaginations here.

I told the audience I'd been hired by the Tell-Tale Hearts to help them look for clues, and that one of the first things I'd discovered was that one of the members of our group was a grand-daughter of the great spiritualist, Madame Blavatsky. The grand-daughter, Bambi Blavatsky, was also an accomplished medium and I had cajoled her into summoning up the spirits of the weekend's two victims. Then I told the audience that we, like the group before us, would also be having a seance, *but,* I said triumphantly, we would not be using masks or flashlights or any cheap theatrical tricks! We would not be using these things because we did not *think* to use them! I ad-libbed a few more lines and trust me on this, I had the entire audience rolling with laughter. Just as people once loved deLautentis' "Konk," they also loved my "Clue-So." In a word, I was great. The seance unfolded, and "Bambi" brought forth the spirit-voices. Ann Costello was wonderful, even throwing in some wind and howling ghost noises. Nice touch that. Then the Fiftysomething lady

clicked with the other spirit-voice, but she flubbed her lines, failing to give the crucial information on how the culprit dumped the evidence of the bogus manuscript into the lake. We ended the seance quickly as I did my best Clouseau to sum up the results, and accuse the suspect.

To sum things up here, we got a big round of applause and the judges and writers/suspects seemed to really enjoy it. Later as the solution was revealed by the organizers, it was discovered that no one had completely solved the puzzle (but we would have come the closest if our second spirit-voice hadn't flubbed her lines). The judges awarded most original presentation to the first special effects seance but told us, it was a close choice between us and them thanks to the guest appearance by Inspector Clouseau.

After that, we closed for lunch where Matt, Paul, Steve and I decided that next year *we* should be the guest writers at Mohonk Mountain House. We cornered the woman who organized the event and she loved us. She hooked us up with the writer who "creates" the mystery each year and we plan to bogart him into inviting us. I'll keep you posted on late-breaking developments.

So there you have it, a little break from the usual ranting. Hope you liked it as much as I did. See you next time.

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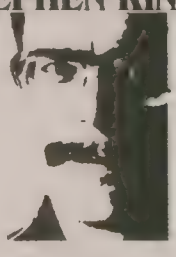

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PETER CROWTHER

PETER CROWTHER is the editor of the critically-acclaimed *Narrow Houses* anthology series and the co-author (with James Lovegrove) of the forthcoming dark fantasy novel, *Escardy Gap*. His short stories have appeared just about everywhere. Crowther lives in Harrogate, England.

"He's a what?" Doc Bannerman slammed his locker door closed and turned to face Jimmy Mitulak.

"An eater." The word hung in the air with the dying echo of the metal door as though it were a part of the sound. "He eats his victims," Mitulak went on, hanging his black shirt on the back of his door. He shook his head and clunked his teeth together, growling.

Bannerman rolled his eyes in despair. "This fucking city, it gets to me sometimes. Gets so I think maybe I can't take any more of it."

"But still you turn in with each new shift."

"Yeah." He drew the word out lazily. "But maybe one day . . ."

"Yeah, maybe one day you'll win the lottery." Mitulak smiled. "I'll know it before you do, though, cos that'll be the day I drive down Sixth and all the lights'll be in my favor." He pulled a crumpled, brown, short-sleeved shirt from his locker and struggled into it. As Mitulak slid his holster over his head, Bannerman saw a cartoon drawing of a bowling ball with a lit fuse coming out of one of the finger-holes and the words BOWL PATROL — and, in smaller letters beneath, MITULAK — emblazoned on the back.

"Nice shirt."

Mitulak turned around and squinted at him. "You serious?"

Bannerman shook his head. "No."

"My sister, Rosie. She designed it."

"I didn't know she was a designer."

Mitulak lifted his jacket off the peg and closed his locker. "She isn't," he said as he slapped Bannerman's back and made a gun sign with his hand. "Keep an eye on him, okay?"

Bannerman nodded. "I'll keep both of 'em on him."

"You'd better," Mitulak shouted over his shoulder as he opened the locker-room door. "He 'specially likes eyes."

Bannerman sneered a smile. "Who've I got?"

Mitulak was already halfway out and he didn't stop. His answer floated back through the gap between the door and the jamb, merging with the sound of footsteps already fading down the corridor to the parking lot. "Gershwin and Marty. See ya."

Bannerman changed into his shirt and pants and strapped his holster onto his belt. Then he made a last call into the bathroom and walked out into the corridor, made a right away from the back door and started up the stairs.

The holding cell where they had the beast was on the first floor, tucked against the wall in an open plan office where the uniforms could write up their collars. Just like in the movies. Above that was a flat roof, looking out onto the oily waters of the Hudson. Below, was a walk-through main desk and seven small offices. Below *that* was the locker room and the showers.

The 17th Precinct building was in a derelict area two blocks west of the Port Authority terminal and one block south of the Lincoln Tunnel. It was surrounded by warehouses filled with containers of frozen fish and electrical goods. No people. Particularly at night.

It was 3:03 a.m. when Denny 'Doc' Bannerman signed in at the front desk and walked slowly up the corridor to the rec room.

His nickname came courtesy of a one-year spell doing medicine at N.Y.U. Medical Center. It was to there, the 18-storey Hospital building, that Denny's policeman father had taken a young punk spaced out of his head on PCP. The punk had laughed and cried, both at the same time, and, in an all-too brief second when nobody was paying him too much attention, he had pulled a two-handled telescopic wire out of his shoe, wrapped it around Jim Bannerman's neck and, with a swing of his hands, severed the big man's head and sent it scudding across the floor. Then the kid had leapt through a plate glass window, dropped two floors smashing both legs, three ribs, both collarbones and the hood of a 1983 Studdebaker before trying to scurry away across 20th Street like the stocking-clad torso in Todd Browning's *Freaks*. When the delivery van had hit the punk, witnesses said he was still laughing. Denny never went back to the hospital.

Bannerman pushed open the rec room door and cleared his throat. "Officer Bannerman reporting for

duty," he said, clicking his heels to complement the officialese.

"Hey, how you doing Bannerman?" It made a change from Marty Steinwitz's usual greeting of *What's up, Doc?* which he usually supplemented with a munching chuckle a la Bugs Bunny.

"Just fine." Doc lifted the night's call-sheet from the desk. Steinwitz returned his attention to a thick slab of coagulated pizza which he lifted from a *Ssbarro* bag perched precariously in front of him, on a maze of papers and forms, alongside a polystyrene cup of milky coffee, its top edges pinched tight with teeth marks.

"What's the pizza?" Bannerman asked without turning his attention from the papers in his hand.

Steinwitz held up the steaming mess and belched. "Pancreas and large intestine."

Bannerman glanced up and grimaced. "Ho fucking ho."

Steinwitz shrugged and continued to eat, getting the mess all over the lower part of his face.

Bannerman read on. Pinned to the back of the call-sheet was the eater's record details. The guy was a bona-fide head-case. No doubt about it. The record itemized the contents of his freezer — various entrails and intestines contained in see-through bags — a wardrobe of custom-made 'clothes' and several items of undeniably avant-garde 'furniture' which included an occasional lamp fashioned out of a moldering leg stump, two torsos bound together with garden twine and used, or so it would appear, as a footstool, and three arms, suitably bent at the elbow and attached to the living room walls in a grim parody of exotic boomerangs or headless geese flying to sunnier climes.

He wanted to feel revulsion but couldn't. That was the worst part of the job right there: the way it shaved off a person's ability to shake his head at the weird and the absurd. Here, nothing was weird any more. Nothing was absurd. Things just *were*, that was all. He settled back into his chair, removed the gun from his holster for comfort and propped his feet on his desk. "There any coffee?" He opened a drawer and dropped the gun inside.

"I was just gonna make a fresh pot."

"Sure could use it."

Steinwitz nodded and bit into his pizza. "Just let me finish up my supper, and I'll get right onto it," he said through a full mouth.

Bannerman returned his attention to the call-sheet as he shook a cigarette out of a crumpled crumple-proof pack. "You seen him yet?"

"The eater?" The word came with a thick half-chewed wedge of what looked like cheese and anchovies that landed with a thud on the open file in front of him on the desk top.

Bannerman lit the cigarette and threw the burning match into a full ashtray next to his arm. "Yeah." He blew out smoke. "His name's Mellor."

"I know," Steinwitz said as he gathered the expelled food between two pudgey fingers and slid it into his mouth. Just for a second it looked to Bannerman as though it were alive, like a long, stringy worm, folded in on itself time after time and hanging with thin bubbly veils of cheese, twisting in his grip. "What's he like?"

"What's he *like*? You mean, does he like have horns and a tail or something?"

"No, I mean what's he like? How does he talk? How—"

"Kind of deep." Steinwitz spoke in a throaty baritone, his ample chin resting on his shirt collar. "How the fuck do I know what he talks like. Go talk to him yourself, you're so interested." He lifted the glop to his mouth again and then stopped. "Hey, that's an idea. You like cooking . . . go compare some recipes." He sniggered and pulled off a piece of anchovy that looked like a wriggling worm and slurped up into his mouth. The call sheet said they had found the remains of 32 bodies. It had to be some kind of record. The sheet also said that some of the bodies seemed to date back a long ways but that the condition might have something to do with the lime content of the ground in which they had been buried, or something like that. Basically, not a lot could either be done or determined until they had the forensic results back. Then they might be able to pin a few names to the remains.

Bannerman shook his head and blew out smoke. "Thirty two bodies. Jesus Christ."

Steinwitz burped and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "*He* almost certainly wasn't one of them."

"*Who* wasn't—Oh, hey, that's funny, you know that? You ever think of going into Vaudeville?"

Steinwitz stopped eating for a second and looked straight at Bannerman. "That's what this is, isn't it?" He waved a greasy hand in a wide arc, taking in the room, the station and maybe even more beyond that. "A routine? A stand-up routine?" He seemed to produce another piece of food from the side of his mouth and started to chew again.

Bannerman shook his head and stared at Steinwitz. "I swear I don't know what's gotten into—"

"And, anyways, there's more than thirty two."

For a second, it seemed mightily oppressive in the small room. Bannerman watched Steinwitz eat his pizza. It sure had a lot of tomato on there — the stuff was all over Steinwitz's hands.

"How d'you mean, more than thirty two?"

"*Bodies*. More than thirty two *bodies*. I mean what are we talking about here?"

"I know *bodies*, okay? I mean what makes you say there are more than thirty two?"

"Because—" He paused for maximum effect. "—that's the way it is. There are more."

"Says who?"

Steinwitz smiled, his mouth a thick smear of pizza topping, and jabbed a runny finger against his chest. "Me says, that's who."

"And who are you?"

Steinwitz chewed, swallowed and stared. He smiled and said, "What about all the stuff in the freezer? Where'd that come from?"

Bannerman's shoulders relaxed. "Oh," he said, "yeah. Forgot about that."

Steinwitz wiped his mouth on a napkin and waved a finger. "Shouldn't forget about stuff like that," he said. "Gotta think about the promotions. Gotta think like Sherlock Holmes."

Bannerman threw the call sheet onto the desk. "Yeah, right. Sherlock Steinwitz."

Steinwitz laughed and stood up.

Bannerman laughed along with him, suddenly realizing that it sounded forced, unnatural.

Steinwitz said, "Coffee?"

"Yeah." Bannerman stood up and followed Steinwitz out of the room, watched him walk to the front desk. "Hey, where's Gershwin?"

Steinwitz reached across for the coffee pot and switched it on. He shrugged without turning around. "Gershwin? Oh, he went to check on the prisoner."

Bannerman shook his head. "Five'll get you ten he's on the goddam telephone again. Who's he call at this time of night, anyway?"

"Beats me."

"I'll go and get him down here."

"'Kay."

"You got the phones geared to come in down here?"

"The phones are fine."

Bannerman turned and walked along the corridor, away from the front desk. He pushed open the swing doors and started up the stairs. A half a minute later he walked into the squad room and paused, looking around the main office.

The desks were strewn with piles of papers, cardboard cups partly filled with cold coffee and greaseproof paper packages of unfinished deli feasts. He figured that the Marie Celeste probably looked a lot like this. Round-backed chairs sat at angles to desks, a television set picture glowed in the corner — Lee Marvin smashing a new car into thick concrete pillars, each impact making no sound at all — while a radio across the office advertised second-hand cars at knock-down prices. Bannerman smiled at the timing and looked across at the far wall. At the cage. It was empty.

He stepped into the squad room — suddenly wishing he hadn't removed his gun — and walked slowly between the desks, keeping his eyes wide. Then he saw the figure, lying on the bunk at the back of the cage, wrapped in a thick blanket, his face turned to the wall. He hated the relief he felt. He just hadn't been able to see Mellor because of the surrounding desks. That was all. What the hell was wrong with him?

"Hey, Gershwin? You on the goddam telephone again?"

There was no answer.

What seemed somehow even worse was the fact that Mellor hadn't moved.

Bannerman turned his full attention to the figure and called again, louder. "Gershwin?"

Still nothing.

He walked over to the cage and stared at the prisoner. *Was* he moving? Could he see the faint traces of the man's back rising and falling? Maybe he was in a deep sleep. After all, it must have been one hell of a day.

On the radio, a woman with a come-to-bed voice started talking about McCain's pizzas like they were sex aids.

Pizzas. *Ssbarro* closed at midnight. And yet the pizza that Marty had been eating had looked hot, or warm at least. He remembered seeing it steaming. Bannerman frowned. The microwave. That was how he had done it. The frown disappeared. What was *wrong* with him?

He turned off the radio and the television set and lifted a plastic mug from a nearby desk, rattling it across the bars of the cage, like he had seen Jimmy Cagney do a thousand times. "Hey, Mellor — you want anything?"

"How about a plate of liver 'n' eyeball risotto?" said a voice behind him.

Bannerman spun around to see Marty Steinwitz holding out a steaming mug of coffee.

"I brought it up to you in case you'd gotten involved with the prisoner. Here."

Bannerman took the coffee and nodded thanks. He took a sip. It tasted good and strong, though there was a faint metallic undertaste.

Steinwitz sat down heavily and rested his feet against an open desk-drawer. "That good?" he asked.

"Mm, hits the spot."

"New blend," Steinwitz said. "Chicory and soya."

"Ah." Bannerman nodded, feeling inexplicably easier.

"You seen Gershwin?"

Bannerman shook his head.

Steinwitz made a clicking noise with his mouth and then thrust a finger between his teeth and his cheek. "Maybe he's out in the storeroom," he said around the finger.

"Yeah." Bannerman took another sip of coffee, swallowed and noticed a piece of grit on his lip. He picked it off and studied it, then threw it into a nearby basket. "Guy's out like a light," he said looking across at Mellor. The figure had not moved during their entire conversation, he was sure of it.

"You ever wonder what makes them do it?"

"Kill people?"

Steinwitz nodded and clasped his hands on his stomach. "And eat them. That's the thing. Eating *people*."

Bannerman shrugged. "Maybe he gets a charge."

"A charge?"

"Yeah, you know — a thrill, kind of. Some kind of sexual turn-on." Bannerman drained the coffee and put the mug on the desk. "I can't figure it."

Steinwitz sighed and moved his hands behind his head, cradling it. "You ever wonder what it tasted like? Human meat?"

"Same as any other meat, I guess." Bannerman walked across to the cage and held onto the bars, rattling them, making sure they were securely locked.

"I think it's power."

"Huh?"

"The reason he does it. Maybe it gives him some kind of power, an edge. Maybe—" He stopped talking and turned his head sharply.

Bannerman followed the other man's gaze and looked at the door. "What? What is it?"

Steinwitz sat up on his chair. "Thought I heard something."

"Like what?"

"Dunno. Wait here a minute." Steinwitz stood up and walked across the room. When he reached the door, he opened it slowly and looked out. He turned back, shrugged, and mouthed *Wait*. Then he stepped out and closed the door behind him.

Bannerman waited.

Suddenly, the precinct house seemed impossibly big and him inside it impossibly small. Impossibly small and *very* vulnerable. He waited a little longer and then shouted, "Everything okay?", but there was no answer. What had Steinwitz heard? Bannerman wished his partner had at least given him some idea before he had just gone off like that. It wasn't like him. It wasn't like him at all. Damn me for leaving the fucking gun downstairs, he thought.

He strained to listen. He strained so hard he imagined he could hear the clock near the front desk ticking. But that was two sets of doors, a flight of stairs and two corridors away. Maybe it was his watch. Bannerman lifted his arm and looked at the watch-face. It was a little before four a.m. He lifted it all the way to his ear and listened for a gentle ticking. There was no sound.

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He turned around to the cage and watched Mellor's body for signs of movement. Had he moved? Had Mellor turned around and watched him while he had been watching the door? He didn't like to think that. He didn't like to think of Mellor quietly turning around, quietly standing up and oh-so-quietly shuffling across the cage towards his back. His unprotected, unsuspecting back. Sure there were bars between the two of them but were bars enough? Maybe the prisoner could have reached through those bars and grabbed him . . . maybe he could have ripped his—

He shook his head and scattered the black thoughts away like crumbs from the table. "Hey, Mellor!" He banged on the bars again. "Hey, sleeping beauty . . . rise and shine. Come on!"

The body just lay there, didn't move a muscle.

He was dead. That was it. The guy had up and died on them. Here they were, jumping at the slightest sound, and all because of some guy lying dead in the cage, stiffening up right now, probably. Maybe he should check on him.

Bannerman looked around for the keys and saw them hanging from the hook on the wall beneath a large, hand-drawn sign that said POKEY in big letters. He walked across and lifted the keys, feeling something slide in his stomach as he held their coolness in his hand. He jingled them and watched for some sign from Mellor. Nothing. He walked back to the bars and rattled the keys across them. Nothing.

He shuffled through the keys until he hit on the right one and then inserted it into the lock, started to turn it slowly.

"Hey, I ain't sure you wanna be doing that, man," said Gershwin from the door. "I ain't sure you wanna be doing that *a-tall.*" He slammed the door behind him and strolled across the squad room. Bannerman watched him, suddenly aware of the dumb look he must have on his face.

"Where you been? Didn't you hear me calling you?"

Gershwin frowned, raised his shoulders and splayed out his hands. "Hey, I'd heard you, man, I'd've answered. What's up?"

Bannerman pulled the key from the lock and checked the cage-door again. Just to be safe. "I'll tell you what's up," he said. "Marty heard something downstairs and—"

"Wasn't anything."

"Wasn't—"

"I just saw Marty, downstairs. He said to tell you it wasn't anything."

"What *was* it?"

Gershwin answered with a shrug. "He didn't say. The wind? Who knows, man? Nothing."

"Where is he now?"

"Downstairs. He's still downstairs."

"What's he doing?"

"He didn't say."

Bannerman rubbed his face with his hands. "God, I don't know . . . This whole thing is spooking me."

Gershwin sat down at the desk that Steinwitz had been sitting at and pulled open the desk drawer, propped his feet on it. Just like Steinwitz. He clasped his hands behind his head and smiled. "What whole thing is that, man?"

Bannerman watched him for several seconds and then smiled.

"What's funny?"

Bannerman laughed.

Gershwin's face broke into a wide smile. "What is it, man?" "It's you . . . you guys . . ." Bannerman shook his head.

Gershwin joined in the nervous laughter, only his contribution didn't seem to sound quite so nervous. "*What?*"

Bannerman felt the smile slip from his face and, as it slipped, he watched the smile on Gershwin's face slip, too. Yeah, *what?* he thought. What the hell was so funny? "Nothing," he said. "Forget it." He turned to the cage and felt Gershwin's eyes watching him. He rattled the bars, though he knew there would be no response. Then he looked across at the squad room door.

"You want another coffee?" Gershwin said.

It was like somebody had encased Bannerman's back in ice. He wanted to ask how Gershwin had known he had already had a coffee; he wanted to ask why Gershwin sat right down at the same desk as Steinwitz; how he'd known which drawer to pull out; how he'd propped his feet up in just the same way as Steinwitz; how he'd clasped his hands behind his head, just like Steinwitz again. But then he didn't want to ask those things. There was a large part of his head that said, *No, let's not play their game; let's not show them we're falling for it.* And there was a small part of his head, a tiny, darkened part, where the sun never shone and where things—even the most ridiculous things—were simply accepted . . . where questions were never asked. That part said, *Don't let him know you know.*

Know what? said the big, rational part.

Just don't let him know, came the answer.

Bannerman heard Gershwin stand up from his chair. "I said, you want another—"

"No!" Bannerman turned around quickly and, just for a second, the other man seemed to falter. "No," Bannerman said, calmer now. "Thanks."

"Is anything . . . wrong?"

Bannerman winced inwardly at the suspicion in the question. It oozed suspicion. He'd blown it. He glanced back at the door, irrationally considering his chances of making it. Then he looked back and started to laugh. At first, it was forced but then it just seemed

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to flow naturally. The ease with which it flowed amazed him. Hysteria, he guessed. He laughed so loud and so hard that it hurt. He leaned back against a desk and folded his arms across his stomach. "Is *anything* wrong! Hell, is anything *right's* more the question," he said between laughs that came dangerously close to out-and-out sobs. "We're holed up here," he said, "the three of us, with some whacko who eats people for a hobby— " He pointed to the body in the cage (*Who is it*? that dark part of his head wondered) "— and the dude up and dies on us while he's in custody." He took a deep breath. "Now, how's that gonna look in the morning? Huh?"

Gershwin watched him, his head tilted slightly to one side. "I'll tell you how it's gonna look," Bannerman said, standing up and walking towards the other man, hoping he wouldn't be able to hear his heart thudding, "it's going to look . . . *bad*." He laid emphasis on the last word like it was cement.

Gershwin continued to watch.

Bannerman turned around and started towards the door, mentally counting the steps, mentally humming, mentally praying, mentally waiting.

"Where are you going?"

"To tell Steinwitz we have a problem," he said without stopping. "A fucking big problem." He pulled open the door, holding his neck so tight that the muscles would ache for days. If he was lucky. He walked along the corridor to the stairs, forcing himself not to run, forcing himself not to turn around.

The door clicked shut behind him. There was no other sound. Walking down the stairs, he muttered to himself. He wasn't sure what he was muttering but he made sure the word 'problem' cropped up in it several times, and the phrase 'up and died on us', too. He imagined that Gershwin was right behind him, could almost sense his breath on his exposed neck . . . breath from his open mouth . . . his *wide* open mouth.

He walked along the downstairs corridor as loudly as he could. Bannerman, man with a mission, man without fear. Yeah! "Hey, Marty?" he yelled. "Marty, we got a problem. It's a fucking big problem, mi amigo." He kept walking. Through the downstairs doors. Towards the main desk. Still walking. "Marty," he yelled again, "you listening to me? You hear we got a problem?"

There was no answer. Of course.

The precinct house doors loomed ahead of him.

He kept on walking.

"Yeah, the problem we got is— " He reached the doors, reached out . . . "It's big, Marty. It's—" His hand touched the handle, grasped it firmly, and turned.

The doors were locked.

"It's one big fucking problem," he said in a soft voice that somehow seemed very alone.

Bannerman looked down at the lock and saw there were no keys. He hadn't expected any.

He turned around, half-expecting Gershwin to be standing watching him, a knife and fork in his hands, chanting *Chow time*! over and over. The place was empty.

He started to walk back the way he had come, mentally cursing the security of the station: barred windows, steel doors . . . you name it. "Hey, Marty? You gone back upstairs?" he shouted. Then, his voice lower, "What the fuck is the lieutenant gonna say when we hand over a dead body, for crissakes?"

Halfway along the corridor he turned into the side office he and Steinwitz — or whoever Steinwitz was *now* — were in earlier. He was still muttering when he picked up the receiver. Still muttering when he jabbed the numbers. But he stopped muttering—

—the phones are fine —

when he heard the silence from the earpiece. He had always thought that statements like *The silence was deafening* were ridiculous. But here it was, real, honest-to-God deafening silence. That explained what had been bothering him earlier: no incoming calls. No complaints about domestic fights; no robberies; no shootings or knifings. *Just . . . eatings*, the dark part of his head observed.

He replaced the receiver as gently as he could and leaned on the desk-top with both hands. Then he saw the file on the desk, the file that Marty had been looking at while he ate his pizza. There were stains all over it. He leaned over and read upside down:

HOBBIES — Music, golf and cooking

That was

—hey, that's an idea. You like cooking . . . go compare some recipes—

his own personal file. Steinwitz had been reading his own personal fucking file! Bannerman reached out to pick up the file and throw it across the office but managed to stop himself. Instead, he pulled open the drawer of the desk he was sitting at. His gun wasn't there. He checked to make sure it hadn't slid to the back, but the drawer was completely empty.

He straightened up and considered his position. It didn't take long. Locked doors, barred windows, dead telephones, no gun — all the other firearms were locked up in a metal cabinet that only the lieutenant had a key for.

Steinwitz was walking along the corridor when Bannerman stepped out of the office. "What you— " Steinwitz started in Gershwin's Brooklyn drawl; then he cleared his throat and said, "What're you doing down here?" The replacement nasal tone was Marty Steinwitz's.

"Looking for *you*," Bannerman said, all but placing his left hand on his hip and wiggling his right index finger like a fourth-grade schoolteacher. He hoped Steinwitz's dialect-slip hadn't been intentional — which would mean Steinwitz wanted him to comment on it — and he hoped that, if it were unintentional, Steinwitz wouldn't think he had noticed it.

"Problem?"

Problem? Bannerman wanted to ask where Steinwitz had been, wanted to rub his nose in it. But

— don't let him know you know—

he didn't dare.

He forced himself to walk up to Steinwitz, stand right in front of him, like he was going past, then he stopped. "I was looking for you."

Steinwitz glanced at the office Bannerman had just left and returned his attention to his face. "I was taking a dump."

Bannerman nodded. "Thank you for sharing that with me. Was it a good one?"

Steinwitz pulled a face and rubbed his stomach. "Think I might've eaten something disagreed with me." (Was that the hint of a smile tugging at the edges of his mouth?) "What's up?"

Bannerman slumped back against the wall and thrust his hands — his increasingly sweaty and shaky hands — deep into his trouser pockets. "Oh, nothing much. Nothing except we've got a dead prisoner in the cage."

Steinwitz narrowed his eyes and watched him. "Dead?"

He's playing for time, Bannerman thought. He's weighing up what kind of a threat I am to him. He's wondering if he should stop the game right now. Does he know I know the phones are dead? Does he know I've tried the doors? Does he know I've seen that he was reading my personal file? Does he know I've been looking for my gun? He looked deep into Steinwitz's eyes, searching for a sign, a sign that he was wrong, that he was being stupid and everything was A-okay. But though the eyes were Marty's eyes — a conviction that came to him not without an element of surprise; after all, why would he study another man's eyes, even over the many years he had known him? — but then again they weren't. They were the right color, sure, but they were darker and without depth. Fish eyes, lacking in . . . soul. He nodded. *He knows*, said the voice in his head. "Yeah, dead. Why don't you go see."

Steinwitz watched him, shuffled from one foot to the other. "Gershwin's up there," Bannerman added.

Steinwitz smiled. "Better take a look then, I guess."

"Why don't you do that." He stood up from the wall and started back to the main desk.

"You not coming up?"

Bannerman replied without turning around. "Yeah. First I'm gonna brew up some fresh coffee. Looks like it's going to be a quiet night."

"That's the way I like it," Steinwitz said softly behind him.

Bannerman nodded slowly as he walked towards the coffee maker and, just for a second, he felt like giving up. He felt like turning around and telling Steinwitz, *Okay, you win. But kill me first, okay?* But he didn't think that whatever it was that occupied his friend's body now would observe such a display of generosity. Such *weakness*. He kept walking and felt a wave of relief when he heard the door at the end of the corridor behind him swing closed.

As he reached the desk he turned to look behind him. Steinwitz had gone. He leaned against the counter containing the coffee maker, coffee and various mugs, and forced himself to think. What now? He looked up at the front doors, checking for signs of a key hanging somewhere next to them. Nothing. He looked across at the barred windows and, though he couldn't see them, thought about all the empty warehouses in the streets beyond. No life anywhere.

He had to get out.

Suddenly, he jolted upright. Downstairs! He could get out from the basement. What had taken him so long? He switched on the hot water and then walked calmly but quickly across to the stairs to the basement. Checking the corridor to the stairs leading up to the squad room, he placed his hand on the door leading to the basement, grimacing as he expected it to be locked.

The handle turned.

The door came open.

Another quick check to see that the corridor was clear and he slid inside and started down the stairs.

As he traveled down the air got fresher, cooler. He ran, now, taking steps two and three at a time. When he reached the bottom he stopped and looked back up the staircase. Saw the spare key hanging beside the door. Bannerman bit into his bottom lip as he considered running back up the stairs to lock the door. Would he get halfway up and the door suddenly open, though? *Chow time!* He decided against it and turned to the corridor leading past the changing rooms to the back door. Halfway along he stopped and listened for sounds of footsteps coming down the stairs, accompanied by Bernard Herrman's shrieking violins. But all was quiet.

He reached the back door, took the handle in his hand, turned the dead-lock and pulled. It opened.

"Where the hell *you* going?" Jimmy Mitulak said.

Bannerman stopped dead and stared.

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"What the hell's the *matter* with you?" Mitulak said.

"What are *you* doing here? You should be home."

Mitulak frowned. "I forgot something. What are you, my mother?"

"What did you forget?" Bannerman said backing down the corridor.

"My bowling shoes. We got a match tomorrow—*today* now. Look, what the hell's the matter?"

"You could've picked them up in the morning."

"Doc, what *is* this? I gotta be in Buffalo by— Hey, since when do I gotta tell you everythin— "

Bannerman grabbed hold of Mitulak's jacket and pulled it open. "You still got your gun on."

"Yeah, I still got my gun on. Come on, now, what's— "

"Get inside."

Mitulak stepped warily into the corridor, still frowning.

"Let me see it."

Mitulak frowned some more.

"The gun, let me see your fucking gun."

Mitulak smiled and started to shake his head.

"Jimmy, I'm not playing around here. Let me see the gun."

Mitulak flipped the harness catch and removed the gun, held it out to Bannerman. "I hope I'm not going to regret this."

Bannerman took it gingerly, checked the cartridge. It was full. He secured the cartridge and handed it back to Mitulak with a visible sigh of relief.

"You wanna tell me what's going on?"

"He's out."

"Who's out?"

"The eater, Mellor. He's loose in the station."

"What?!"

Bannerman nodded. "But . . . it gets worse."

"How worse?"

"He's disguised."

"How can he be disguised? There's only you and— "

"He's disguised as Marty."

"Marty?"

"And Gershwin."

Mitulak started to laugh. "Hey, I don't know what you're smoking, Doc, but how about passing it around."

"Listen to me, goddamit!"

Mitulak's smile faded.

"He's taken their appearance. I know, I know," he said as Mitulak looked at him like he was going mad. "It sounds crazy, but he has."

"How?"

"How the fuck do I know how. Maybe he's a fucking Ymir or a face-hugger . . . maybe he can assume the identity of whoever he eats . . . you know? Like the Indians? They ate the hearts of their enemies because they thought it gave them their enemies' strength. Maybe this guy gets the full thing . . . hair, face, looks . . . everything."

"He's *eaten* Gershwin and Marty?"

Bannerman shrugged. "Maybe. All I know is that they're never together."

"Never together?"

"Never together in the room at the same time. And when Gershwin came into the squad room he sat down in the same chair as Marty . . . propped his feet on the desk just the same way as he had been doing a few minutes earlier. And . . . yeah, and Mellor's dead. In the cell. He doesn't move or speak or anything."

"You just said that Mellor was loose."

"Jesus Christ! He *is* loose. But he's left his body in the cell, curled up so it's facing the wall."

"You sure it's him? In the cell?"

"Sure as I can be without going in there and checking him out."

"You haven't checked the body?"

"Hey, I've seen *Silence of the Lambs*, okay? I wasn't going to go in there and have him wearing my head like a Halloween mask."

Mitulak thought for a moment. "But, if Mellor's out and about, what's the problem with going in the cell?"

Bannerman was breathing heavily, almost panting.

"Well?"

"I wasn't sure then. I'm sure now. Okay? I didn't want to go into the cell when I thought that, maybe, Mellor was playing possum. But then all these other things happened— "

"Like Gershwin and Marty sharing a chair?"

"Yes! It sounds crazy . . . I *know* it sounds crazy, okay? But my gun."

"Your gun?"

"It disappeared. And Marty was reading my personal file . . . and the phones are dead . . . and the front doors are locked . . . Look, we have to do something, Jimmy."

Mitulak made noises with his mouth as he considered. Bannerman shook his head and ran both hands through his hair, turning around and walking to and fro in the corridor.

"Okay."

"You believe me?"

"Let's say I believe *you* believe, and leave it at that for now. Maybe it's worth checking it out."

Bannerman suddenly felt as though all of his problems were over. Then, just as he felt like hugging Jimmy Mitulak, he remembered that they still had to confront Steinwitz. Or Gershwin. Could he move both of them at the same time, this eater? He didn't think so. It would be one or the other.

"So what do we do?" said Mitulak, interrupting Bannerman's thoughts.

Bannerman glanced longingly at the back door and then turned to face him. "We go up."

Mitulak nodded. "Right." He slipped off the safety catch on his gun and hefted it slowly in his hand, like he was weighing it. "Right," he said again. "You lead the way."

Bannerman turned around and walked back along the corridor to the stairs.

Taking the stairs slowly, stopping after every couple of risers to listen for any sound of movement, took time. In fact, it took too much time. Halfway up, Bannerman started to wonder what Steinwitz was doing up there. Had he discovered that he Bannerman — wasn't there? If so, where did he think he'd gone? Surely by now he would have checked all the possible hiding places — there weren't many, for crissakes — and would probably have concluded that he was downstairs. If so, then why hadn't the eater come down after him?

He stopped and listened: all quiet. He pressed on.

Maybe Steinwitz had suddenly remembered the downstairs door, and had gone out from upstairs and snuck around the back of the parking lot to wait for him outside. Shit! Maybe the eater had tried the door and discovered it was open . . . then sneaked in, sneaked along the downstairs corridor, taken a look around the corner of the staircase, real quiet, and seen Mitulak and him creeping up the stairs.

Bannerman stopped again and turned his head slowly. There was only Mitulak behind him. The rest of the staircase was empty. He shook his head and carried on. Two steps further and he was at the top, his hand on the door handle.

"Hey . . ."

Mitulak's sharp whisper near-on made Bannerman jump out of his skin. He held onto the handle tightly and hissed, "What?"

"You want maybe I should go first?"

"Why?"

"Because I got a gun. If this guy is round the corner when you open the door — and if he knows you're onto him — he's gonna start shooting as soon as we show ourselves."

It made sense. "That makes sense," Bannerman whispered, and he changed places with Mitulak, staring intently at the door handle while neither of them was holding it.

When they were in place, Mitulak gently turned the handle and pushed. The door crept open silently.

"See anything?" Bannerman whispered.

"Nothing." Mitulak pushed the door a little wider and stepped onto the top step, folding his body into the door, his gun flat against the handle.

"Anything now?"

"Just wait, for— " He stopped.

Bannerman drew in his breath. "What? What is it?"

Mitulak jammed his head between the door and the jamb and tried to look up the corridor to the right.

"What is it?" Bannerman asked again.

"It's Marty."

"Jesus Cri—Where? Where is he? Can he see you?"

Mitulak pushed the door wider and looked around it to the left. Then he stepped back and turned to Bannerman.

"Now I believe you."

"Huh?"

"It's Marty. He's dead."

"Dead?"

Mitulak nodded. "Far as I can make out."

"Where is he?"

"Lying on the floor right in front of us."

"Any sign of Gershwin?"

Mitulak shook his head. "God. Marty. Dead." The three words came out slow and punctuated into tiny sentences, each with a poetic, grim resonance.

"What do we do now?"

"We go out. What else can we do?"

Bannerman grunted. There was nothing else.

"Ready?" said Mitulak.

"Ready."

"Right!" He pushed open the door and ran, crouched over, to the main desk on the left.

Bannerman stepped up onto the top step and looked around the door-edge. Marty stared up at him. He was naked, lying facedown on the floor about fifteen feet from the door, his head tilted to one side like he was watching the basement door. His legs were splayed out behind him, his arms stretched in front of him. One half of his face had gone, exposing teeth and gums and part of his cheek bone. His left arm ended just above the wrist in a fray of skin and cartilage. There was no blood.

Bannerman closed his eyes and blinked away the tears, then opened them again. The horror was still there. He pushed open the door and stepped out into the corridor without thinking.

"Hey," Mitulak whispered loudly. "What the hell you doing?"

Bannerman didn't answer. He walked across to Marty Steinwitz's body and looked down at it. There was a folded piece of paper lying on his back. He bent down.

"What is it?" Mitulak whispered.

Bannerman read the words on the note, four lines, carefully typed on one of the machines up in the squad room:

game over
you have gun now

now weer even
lets finnish it

He waved the sheet to Mitulak. "Come read it yourself. He knows you're here."

Mitulak stood up from behind the desk, warily watching for any signs of movement from anywhere. "Huh? How's he know I'm here?"

"He knows I've got a gun." Bannerman shrugged. "How the hell do I know how he knows anything?"

Mitulak reached him and took the note. He read.

Bannerman turned Steinwitz's body over and jumped back. "Jesus H. Christ!"

Mitulak looked up from the note and then down at the body. The whole of Steinwitz's chest had been ripped open, pieces of snapped bone jutting out.

Bannerman said, "He's eaten his heart."

Mitulak said nothing.

"Let's go. He's waiting for us."

Bannerman led the way along the corridor to the doors. They pushed open the doors together and looked up the staircase. Gershwin was hanging from one of the lights. He, too, was naked, his chest similarly destroyed and both legs gone from the knees. As they got closer, they saw that his eyes were missing. A note taped across his stomach read:

getting warmer
the end is neye

Neither of them said anything.

At the top of the stairs, his heart pounding fit to burst out of his own chest, Bannerman turned the handle on the door.

"Wait . . . "

Bannerman turned.

"Let me go first. I'll go left, over towards the cage, you go right."

Bannerman nodded.

"Right!" said Mitulak.

Bannerman threw open the door and both men fell into the room, crashing in two directions behind the desks nearest the door. The hail of bullets Bannerman had expected didn't come.

Bannerman lifted his head above the desk and looked around. He couldn't see anything.

Mitulak did the same.

"Hey . . . " Mitulak said.

"What?"

"I thought you said the guy was dead in the cage."

Shit, Bannerman thought. He knew what was coming next but he had to respond. "He was."

"He ain't now, man," said Mitulak. "Cage is empty."

Bannerman stood up slowly, staring around the squad room. "He's gone back to his own— " He stopped. Over by the far wall, Mellor was sitting against a radiator. He still had the blanket wrapped around him, like an Eskimo or an Indian Chief. Pulled down over his head was a large, brown evidence bag, one side of which was blown apart and stained a red so dark it looked almost black. The wall behind the bag looked like somebody had thrown a pizza at it.

"What is it?" Mitulak said.

"Just wait where you are," Bannerman said. "And cover me." He moved to the side and walked slowly around the desk. As he moved, more of the body came into view. Mellor was holding a gun in one hand. In the other hand was another note. He looked around at Mitulak. Mitulak frowned and mouthed *What*? Bannerman shook his head. *Cover me*, he mouthed. Mitulak nodded and waved the gun.

Bannerman edged his way along the side wall, keeping Mellor in sight all the way. At last he had reached a point where there were no more desks to provide cover. But he had watched the body very carefully and there was no sign of any movement. Either the guy *was* dead or he could hold his breath a very long time.

He crouched down onto all-fours and crept the final few feet towards the body. When he reached it, he leaned over and took hold of the barrel of the gun and gently pulled.

"You okay?" Mitulak whispered.

The gun came away, and Mellor's fingers plopped against his stomach.

"Yeah, I'm okay," Bannerman said. He put the gun in his pocket and reached for the note. Behind him, he heard Mitulak moving between the desks.

Bannerman unfolded the note, a roster sheet, and looked at the other side. It was blank.

"You still okay?"

Bannerman nodded, frowning. "He left a note."

"What's it say?"

"It doesn't. It's blank." He turned it over. It was this week's roster. He looked at the grid and the penciled names in the boxes. One of them was ringed, the one for tomorrow — *today*, now. The box was for 10 a.m.; the name in the box was J. Mitulak.

Bannerman looked at the evidence bag, reached up and lifted it off. The eater had left just enough of the face for Bannerman to recognize who it was, even without the eyes. "Jimmy . . ." he whispered, sadly. Behind him, he heard desks moving as though something large was making its way across the floor.

He saw it all, now, in his mind's eye.

He reached into his pocket and lifted out the gun.

Then he discovered that the cartridge was missing.

"Let's eat," said a voice behind him. It didn't sound like any accent or dialect he had ever heard before.

— CD

"A Conversation With David Morrell"

Mark Graham

When I began reviewing books for the *Rocky Mountain News* in 1977, one of the first assignments I got was David Morrell's third novel, *Last Reveille*, an historical western about Black Jack Pershing's raids into Mexico at the turn of the century. I was so impressed that I immediately read his first two books, a Vietnam War protest novel called *First Blood*, and *Testament*, a thriller about one man's struggle with forces that he can't control.

After the review was printed, a blurb from which would appear on the dust jacket of his fourth novel, *The Totem*, the one that would become a cult classic among horror fans, I was surprised to receive a letter of thanks from the author. That letter began a correspondence that has lasted for seventeen years, although our paths would only cross twice.

In late September, during the tour for his latest thriller, *Desperate Measures*, I spent several hours talking with David, and interviewed him for the Denver Public Library's television feature, *Between the Lines*.

Although the tour was sponsored by Warner Books for *Desperate Measures*, a new version of that horror classic, *The Totem*, was released simultaneously by Donald Grant. If the statistics I have seen are correct, less than one percent of novel manuscripts submitted are published. Now David Morrell has the almost unheard of distinction of seeing two of his books come out at the same time. One of the first things I asked him was how all of this came about.

"It's partly accidental," he said. "*Desperate Measures*, the major thriller that is coming out from Warner Books this year, was something that was on schedule, and I handed it in last September. It takes a year to write a book and about a year to publish a book, and I knew for sure that this book would be coming out this September.

"But in the meantime, almost as a hobby, I had been campaigning to get an alternate version of a novel I published back in 1979, a book called *The Totem*, published. The circumstances of that book were that, back in 1979, the original manuscript had been drastically edited by about half. And in later years, as I got to thinking about that book, I missed all kinds of scenes that I wished had remained in it. So a specialty book publisher named Donald Grant, who does gorgeous books with special bindings and paper for people who enjoy books as objects [agreed to do it]. He's so special that he takes his time. The time the book was originally scheduled was two years ago, and then I thought it would be last year. So it is purely by coincidence the two have come together in the stores at the same time."

After reading the new version, I was amazed by the difference. In recent years I have read two other uncut novels, which had been subjected to extreme reductions for their original publications, Stephen King's *The Stand* and Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*. I was really pleased by King's book. It was like visiting an old friend, but I didn't find it all that different, only longer. I think Heinlein's early editors did a tremendous job. The early book was seminal in my experience as a reader and teacher; the longer, uncut version is tedious. But *The Totem* and *The Totem: Complete and Unaltered* are two totally different books, each a marvel in its own way.

I asked the author how he was able to cut the book and change it the way he did and some of the circumstances around the writing of the original novel.

Cutting the book took three months of non-stop work: "The trick was that the editor [for publisher M. Evans] said he wanted it shorter. The manuscript started off at around 550 pages, and he wanted it around 300 pages. As soon as I had cut some of the subplots, other parts of the book no longer made sense. The connectives were gone. And also he wanted a love interest in it and a couple of other things. And before I knew it the remainder of the book, what was left over from the cutting, had to be redesigned.

"Elements of the plot had to be re-envisioned, and some of the characters reconsidered, and when I did that, then that affected the pace, and that, in turn affected the

style. And the next thing I knew we had gone off on a very different direction than I had planned.

"With the version that has now been published, we have a book that is twice as long, but it doesn't mean I just collated scenes within the book. It's a genuine alternate reality of the 1979 *Totem*. It's not only twice as long, but the plot is two thirds different. It spills over into other parts of the book that, in theory, were retained from the 1979 version. And, equally important, the style is different; it's a much more expansive style. This is sort of the epic version of *The Totem*. And I suppose we should add parenthetically, for those who have not read the book, it is a non-supernatural horror novel that has to do with the spread of a deadly virus."

But, I interjected, a deadly virus that turns people into werewolves.

"Something like that. When I was doing research into *The Totem*, I was so impressed by Stephen King's *'Salem's Lot*, and I just enjoyed what he had done by taking *Peyton Place* and crossing it with *Dracula* and getting *'Salem's Lot*. I thought, can we do something with a different ancient legend such as the werewolf myth? And I went out and I researched like crazy (as I always do), and I wasn't getting any new twists on this at all, and finally, as I was just about to give up on the project, I came to the very last book (I remember this vividly), it was this tattered dog-eared book I found in some cranny of the library. It was by an anthropologist who also dabbled in the animal sciences.

"It was his opinion that the origin for the werewolf myth was a rabies outbreak in ancient times and particularly in the middle ages, so I got to thinking about rabies, and I got to thinking, What if rabies had mutated so that it was now two things. Instead of travelling through the nervous system, as rabies does in its normal version (and it takes several days to develop), what if it travelled through the blood stream so it was virtually instantaneous? And second, what if the place the virus went to was the limbic brain which is the part of the brain which controls our aggressions, and, in effect, if we stripped all other portions of the brain away, we would be dealing with a person as he was 40,000 years ago . . . very feral?

"And the other neat thing about the virus is it runs in a cycle, reduces the victim to near death and, instinctively knowing if it were to multiply any farther, the victim would die, goes into a kind of regressive period, so that the victim appears to come back from the dead.

"So, that's what I mean by a non-supernatural horror novel. It has all the trappings of the kinds of things I thoroughly enjoy reading, but it has a modern scientific twist on it, so that now we are seeing all of these conventions in a new light. And I think it will seem like I have reinvented the werewolf story.

"For fans it's going to be a lot of fun, because they will put the books side by side, and they are going to be bewildered if they try to match them up, and I suspect people will go back to the 1979 version and go back and forth."

Since *The Totem* Morrell's novels have been of the thriller variety. Yet he is one of the few writers of this genre who have been able to keep their cadre of horror fans. Morrell suspects that one of the reasons is that he has retained an element of horror in all of these "mainstream books:"

"Every one of the espionage books has a scene which tips over into overt horror as I understand it, where you are pushing the boundaries, and suddenly you are in mind-threatening situations.

And I try to do it in a non-supernatural way (though I have used supernatural situations), simply because it's less familiar, because there aren't any conventions for non-supernatural horror. In every book there's something over the top that happens. The best example that comes to mind is in a book called *Covenant of the Flame*, where the main character is forced into a pit, a grate is put over her, and a bull is put on top, and the bull's throat is slit, and the blood cascades down through the grate and over the character. Now, there is a justification for this bizarre action in the story, but I had hoped that the readers' reaction would be, No, he's not really going to do that; oh my God! he really is doing that; and then down the blood comes. And it's almost a signature with me that in each book there would be some moment where you say, 'Oh that's really horrible!'"

While the novels have gotten away from the supernatural, Morrell's short stories, novelettes, and novellas are definitely of the supernatural variety. Morrell titles are almost always on the ballots at the World Horror Convention and the World Fantasy Convention, and

Stokers and Howards grace his study at his home in Santa Fe.

Morrell is a former professor of American Literature at the University of Iowa, and, being a teacher myself, one of the stories that scared me the most is "But At My Back I Always Hear," a psychological/supernatural/stalker thriller about a student who hears her teacher's voice when he isn't there. I wondered if the story were autobiographical:

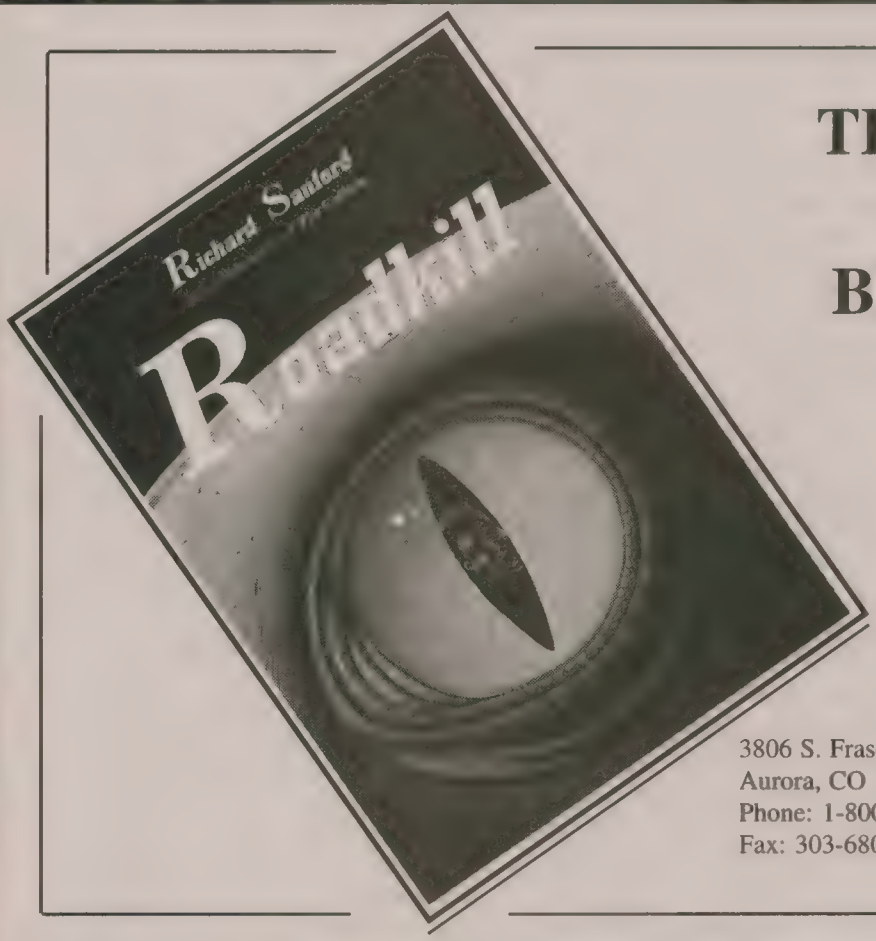
"Two thirds of that story is verbatim. I had shown up one morning at around eight o'clock, getting ready for a class at nine-thirty, and I was startled to find a student waiting for me, *at eight o'clock*, outside my office—a young lady who looked somewhat pathetic, looked very insecure, and she was convinced that I was speaking to her. When I wasn't around, she was hearing my voice. It scared the hell out of me. Because, of course, a lot of famous psychotics hear voices. And she developed a fixation which became clearly unhealthy and potentially dangerous.

"It all came to a head the night Carter was elected. She phoned about one o'clock in the morning (and I put this in the story too), calling from Berkeley, saying she was coming to see me, that I had spoken to her, and she absolutely had to see me. I was very afraid. And then the next night she phoned from Ely, Nevada. She was getting closer, and I was trying to talk to her on the phone, to get her to stop coming. And apparently I said something that worked because she did not show up, but this is one of the sides of writing harrowing fiction and being a public figure—to have disturbed people identify with you."

Morrell has had more than a dozen books published, yet many of his short stories are only available in the original obscure publications, some of these obscure too. A few either appeared first in anthologies, or have been reprinted in anthologies. I asked if it weren't about time for a collection, and David assured me that the near future will offer one:

"It exists. It hasn't been published, but it exists. I finally got to thinking that maybe it was about time to do a collection. So I began assembling everything. I had the material already typed on disk. It was in the computer, so I printed it all out in the order things were published.

"I thought that, maybe what would be interesting is to do notes for each story, autobiographical notes, so that the collection becomes kind of an autobiography of the imagination. And the book would have an introduction which I wrote, talking about how I came to be a writer, how I found my



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voice, how I found my subject matter and a little about the traumas that made me what I am, and then there would be comparable introductions to each story.

"By the time I was finished adding all this material, I was amazed to discover that I had written a lot of short stories. I had a manuscript that runs about 550 pages. Actually, I exaggerate slightly, there are probably about fifteen, but many of them are of novella length, which is probably why I thought there were so many. Some are over sixty typed pages. And so it's put together, and Warner Books has said they will publish it. It's just a question of figuring out the right time slot to do it. I enjoy the short stories a lot. Since then there are three more that are done, and so, at this rate, maybe in another ten or fifteen years I'll have enough to finish another collection."

David admits that the supernatural stories will continue. I wondered if there was a chance for another horror novel:

"Probably no new horror novels. *The Totem* is a non-supernatural novel that comes so close to feeling like a supernatural horror novel. The earlier version probably has that feeling more. The second version has a feeling that is closer to high action with Gothic elements as opposed to the first one which was Gothic with some high action elements.

"*The Totem* was published in 1979 to excellent reception, and it had acquired a kind of cult status among a lot of people interested in horror. In the late '80s my British publisher, Headline, said that they were going to bring out a paperback version there, and would I write an introduction for it? In preparing for that introduction, I was rereading the 1979 text, and was suddenly dismayed to discover that many scenes I had assumed were in the book were not in the book, and I began thinking someone had meddled with the text. What had really happened was that the meddling had been me. I rummaged around in all my files, and by heavens, in a box, somewhere hidden away (I felt like Hawthorne in the beginning of *The Scarlet Letter* removing this musty object), I found the original text, which I cleaned up because the prose did need some tidying.

"It's bound to happen that some people will be introduced to the book in the new version because the '79 version came out only in limited runs. The book has a neat reputation, but a lot of people knew of it only indirectly. So this is now an opportunity to at least have a look at it. What I'm doing currently is retiring the '79 version. Now this could get to be a bit of an amusement. Perhaps ten or fifteen years from now people might say, 'What about that other version?' And then I can get Don Grant maybe to do that version."

While I had discovered David Morrell with his third, and fairly rare, novel, *Last Reveille* (just out in paperback after seventeen years), most people know him as the creator of Rambo in his first novel, *First Blood*. In fact, Morrell labored in relative obscurity, never giving up his day job at Iowa University, until after the release of the motion picture version of *First Blood* starring Sylvester Stallone in 1982.

Being identified with one of the most famous fictional characters of all time has been both a blessing and a curse for Morrell. In fact, one of the reasons for his recent tour was to let independent booksellers know that blood and guts isn't the only thing David writes. He had a lot to say about the Byronic hero that combines his literary background with graphic violence.

"I am ambivalent about Rambo, in terms of the movies. What people have to understand first is that the novel was published in 1972, and had an anti-establishment tone against the Vietnam War, and against the kind of militaristic policies that resulted in the Vietnam War. Rambo is killed at the end of the book by the man who trained him, whose name is Colonel Sam Troutman, and the first name, Sam, was deliberately chosen, as Uncle Sam, and that [the real theme] is a kind of the society destroying the person they created for their specific and current needs.

"I sold the book to the movies around the time the book was published, and for various reasons the film wasn't made for ten years. It was owned by Columbia Pictures and then by Warner Brothers and then a number of other studios. Various really important people such as Richard Brooks, Sydney Pollack, and Steve McQueen were associated with trying to get the project made, and, finally, in '82, it was made by an independent company with Sylvester Stallone. And they turned the piece around, not so much in the first film in '82, which sort of followed my plot, but did it in odd ways that reduced the role of the policeman, and, hence, I think, took a lot of the tension out of the story, and a lot of the significance out of the story, because he, in the novel, was a Korean War veteran and was meant to sort of represent Eisenhower Republicanism against whatever kind of anti-establishment views Rambo had.

"The second movie was the problem. I think it was an exciting film. But it began to have this Reaganesque jingo quality—'Sir, do we get to win this time.' Rambo going off and winning the Vietnam War, finally. Ronald Reagan came on after seeing that film and told a news conference that he had seen a Rambo movie the night before, and now he knew what to do the next time there was a hostage crisis. Well, this remark was repeated far and wide, enough so that some time later, when I was on a book tour in England (I happened to be

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there the day the U.S. attacked Libya), the headline in the *London Times* read (I should have saved the paper, but I was so chagrined I threw it away), 'Rambo Jets Bomb Libya.'

"Many people, as a consequence, have associated what was now an establishment figure with my anti-establishment character. And it's at that point that I got very nervous, and people allowed politics to get involved with their criticisms of the movie which I had nothing to do with. And then that tipped over into the novels.

"It was automatically assumed that I was some kind of war monger or something. I didn't quite understand it all. But I was deeply upset. And I have been trying to make people understand the difference between the novel and movie Rambos. And sometimes, convenient or not, I will dissociate myself from the character and never acknowledge I wrote it."

But the movie really changed David Morrell's life:

"Certainly, it gave me a lot of power. In this century four characters have achieved a kind of independence from their creators: Sherlock Holmes, Tarzan, James Bond, and Rambo. And these characters are known worldwide.

"I sometimes call myself Rambo's father, because it's as if the character were a real person who grew up and went off on his own, and I lost control over him. Now, on the one hand, it is very flattering to be a part of cultural history to this degree, that I created this character who has entered the lexicon, who is in the dictionary, and there is a celebrityhood here that I feel good about. The downside is that, for every person who reads my books, there is somebody who refuses to read them because [of the films] (probably they haven't even seen the films; all they're responding to are the connotations of the word *Rambo* as it is used in slang and what have you), and so it's been a curse as much as a blessing."

Since Morrell achieved the largest portion of his fame from the Rambo movies and from the TV mini series, *Brotherhood of the Rose*, and at least a couple of Morrell's novels, *Testament* and *Blood Oath*, read as if they were *on film*, it is natural to wonder what work will be produced next for the screen. The author talks about some of the frustration on the road from book to film . . . .

"Tri Star [has the option] for *The Fifth Profession* and Universal has an option on *Assumed Identity*. Tri Star has carried about fifteen scripts. I've seen some of the early ones, and each one got farther and farther from the original concept of two bodyguards, one American and one Japanese, whose cultures and characters are tested as they become friends. And it had a lot to do with Japan. Well, the movie is now a science fiction script set in the future to do with the Mideast. And I asked if I could see the latest script, and I was told through an intermediary that I couldn't see the script because I would be insulted.

"And I don't know what's happening with *Assumed Identity* with Universal, except that I know the option is for two-and-a-half years, and they managed to get so far with about nine months remaining in the option: one script written which didn't have enough explosions in it. It's very very depressing to think that, first of all, these film projects achieve a life of their own in terms of development, that people who have never read the original source material, who are relying upon summaries of the book or summaries of previous scripts, and meetings, will go off and think they are doing something that is in keeping with what I wrote. My editor said the other day that it's getting to the point that the stories in the novels that are becoming best sellers and are attracting wide attention are all media driven. And I think, lamentably, that he's right. The problem

is that if the experience that I had on these two projects is any measure, it's a miracle that any pictures get made at all, let alone that they're anywhere near accurate to the original novel. It's very depressing. I don't think either one will be made."

While the movies have been limited, one of the most frequent comments about the author's work is it's visual quality. This isn't entirely coincidental:

"I think of writing novels as if they were novels as radio plays. People have often said to me, 'Oh, the material is so vivid that I can see it, and I was there in the story.' What they don't understand is that I was influenced keenly by radio plays that I listened to as a kid. And, by the way, by James M. Cain writing stripped-down prose. And I learned over the years that there are a lot of things that you don't need to describe, that the reader will do it for you.

"A man walks into an office. It is a lawyer's office, a very very wealthy lawyer's office. He sits in the leather chair and looks at the lawyer across the big desk. Now I gave you a generalization of luxury; I gave you a leather chair and a big desk. That's all I told you about that office, but the reader will supply everything else because the reader has either seen these offices in the movies or been in something comparable to it. And what I do, if I can assume that the reader has been in a comparable situation, I will only give little light touches to anchor the scene, and I'll let the reader describe the scene for me.

"Other times, if it's a situation where I know the reader has not had the benefit of being there, then I will go into detail in the description. But while it seems visual, the key to my writing is what I call *triangulation;* you will never find me appealing only to the sense of sight. There is always, with the sense of sight, another sense that is used to anchor the scene. Sight is matched with touch, or sight is matched with hearing. Here is an example: A man walks into a jail cell and sits on a grey blanket. To me that scene does nothing. I am not in the scene although it is described visually. But now I am going to add one word, and you will be in the scene. It goes like this: A man walks into a jail cell and sits on the scratchy grey blanket. You see the cell and you feel the texture. And now you are sitting on that bunk. And I have found this to be a very valuable technique, which I think accounts for any vividness that the reader sees in my prose."

In his early work Morrell's novels were all but devoid of female characters. But his recent works are as likely to feature heroines as heroes. Consciously or not, his work seems to parallel the times:

"As I look back, until *Brotherhood of the Rose,* it is kind of amazing to me that I had not been working toward developing my women characters as much as the men. In fact, if I had one thing I would do over again in the *Complete and Unaltered Totem* (I'll never let that book go; I'll be working on it forever), I think the veterinarian should have been a woman. No sexual tension between any of the characters. But I think it would have been a natural for her to be a woman, and it might have enriched the book somewhat, but it's too late now.

"Since the *Brotherhood of the Rose* (and this hasn't been in any way an attempt at manipulating), it has been by unconscious choice, the stories have been telling me what to do."

I asked if this shows a change in him as a writer:

"Oh, I think so, yes. I think I have become much more liberated. I think I was afraid to write about strong women. My wife, for example, is a very strong woman, and I am attracted to strong women. But I think it may have been an insecurity on my part, saying I know about men, but do I really know about women? Do I dare try to write about them? Finally, in *Brotherhood,* the story insisted on having a strong woman, and, thereafter, the stories have insisted, and I have felt very comfortable doing this. In addition, I have found it more comfortable to write scenes of sexual behavior, because in the earlier books I would have been to shy to do it."

As a matter of fact, in his latest novel, *Desperate Measures,* one of Morrell's strongest characters to date is Jill Warren, who saves the protagonist and learns to love him. David explains how she is based on some of the most important women in his own life:

"The whole book comes out of a very personal background. My son Matthew died from bone cancer in 1987, and I had written about that event several times; in a non-fiction book called *Fireflies* and several short stories, "The Shrine," for example, which is my favorite of the grief stories, and too based upon a real place I went to that felt as if there were the ghosts of dead children. And then after those short stories I was moved once more to write about grief in *Desperate Measures,* in which the main character has the name of Matt, my son, and he, himself, has lost a child to bone cancer, and I was once again trying to expiate the deep tensions I have about those events in '87. At a certain point in the story the hero [*Desperate Measures]* is in need of help and doesn't know where else to turn and goes to one of the nurses who took care of his son.

"I was struck very much by the quality of the nurses who took care of Matt, the professional and real strength of character they had, to be there day after day in the children's intensive care ward; seeing these kids die and still hanging in there to try to help the next child

who came in. And I thought this would be a really really interesting character to develop. The key moment in the early part of their relationship comes when she finally admits to him that she knows who he is and that he is wanted for several killings and that he is being portrayed as a maniac. She, nonetheless, has let him get close to her. And he asks her why. She responds that she saw the way he tried to take care of his son in whatever way he could in the intensive care ward; doing the sorts of things that I, in real life, did.

"When my son was in a coma, his feet had begun to curl, so what you had to do was put shoes on him for an hour, and then you had to take the shoes off because they were hurting his feet. But the idea was to stop the tendons from curling . . . and bathing his feverish body with wash cloths soaked in ice water. And she says she watched our hero, Matt Pittman, doing this and saw the care he tried to administer to his son. And she concluded that anyone who loved someone with that intensity, couldn't possibly be capable of hurting anyone intentionally, so she has agreed to back him. I found this to be a very tender scene. If Jill was not based on any single person, she was certainly an amalgam of the people who worked so hard with my son."

Even before his son's death, it seemed as if Morrell's protagonists were faced with saving the world, or at least a big piece of society, yet they had no power to save the ones they loved. If there is one recurrent theme in his work, it is this one. From *Testament* to *Desperate Measures,* the main character must rise above his own personal loss and call upon inner reservoirs of courage and goodness to defeat seemingly insurmountable odds. Morrell agrees:

"Writing is self-psychoanalysis. I had a fairly impoverished background, and my father had been killed in the Second World War. I grew up without a male authority figure and generally wouldn't want to relive my youth. When I finally was beginning to make my way as a writer, one of the things that motivated me strongly, apart from the intense urge I have to tell stories, was to provide security for my family. I mean this was like a major obsession. When my son died, one of the great shocks (I had been so naive) was to discover that you cannot guarantee security. This threw my whole world view into question.

"I think the secret to what's going on here is I have a lot of characters who are frantic (in a controlled fashion) to strive for protection and security. They have committed themselves to doing good, but basically, they are also terrified that their own niche of control will be shattered. In fact, control is the key. It comes back again and again to these people. In the midst of the worst kinds of horrifying things, they're saying, 'You can get through this; all you have to do is maintain control.' Now where that comes from in me, I'm not quite sure, but it's obviously a major force.

"And I am struck by my choice of major characters, who are often policemen or soldiers, espionage operatives, people whose professions are indistinguishable from their lives to the point where, if they screw up in their professions, their lives are at stake. What they do for a living could kill them. And I find this tension within these thoughts to be a wonderful way to come to terms with my whole concern about security. One of my major fears is not being in control. But I think that has gradually been relaxing within me. It may be a sign of maturity, in the sense that I have accepted what I cannot change." Much as his protagonists are able to do.

I think one of the things that has kept our correspondence going all these years is that David and I are both voracious readers, and our tastes seem to coincide. I noted that the three most important horror writers today are all regional writers: Nearly all of Stephen King's fiction not only takes place in Maine; it must take place in Maine. Joe Lansdale's East Texas horror probably couldn't even happen in West Texas. And Dean Koontz has even started writing Southern California regional horror. Morrell's books have never settled down to one locale. I wondered if his recent move to Santa Fe might signal Rocky Mountain regional horror. After a fit of laughter, he said it might:

"In fact, the novel I just sent in, the working title of which is *Extreme Denial,* is set, for half the book, in Santa Fe, where I now live. This is, in part, an economic choice. If you are living in an exotic place, why not write about it? But also I saw certain benefits to the locale that I thought I could work out thematically.

"I think the reason I like those writers is that, in each case, the local color that they so skillfully preserve is indicative of a voice, a tone that is present in their work.

"I see in the market place, particularly in horror, but it's also among thrillers, a tendency for writers to be influenced by the kinds of books they have already read, to be replicating in a slightly different way books they admire. And, in many cases, the consequence is that I would say that 80% of the market sounds the same, that they all have the same voice, and they all seem to be imitating each other. When I walk into a bookstore and pick up a book, what I want is something different. I want something unique and powerful and arresting, something that will occupy me.

"King and Lansdale and Koontz, to name a few, have found something distinctive to write

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about. As soon as you say, Joe Lansdale, you have a connotation of a certain kind of writer doing a certain kind of book. The man has a personality in his fiction, just as Dean or Stephen does. That seems to me to be a goal that every writer should be striving for. Certainly, it is what I am striving for.

"I think if you tore the cover of one of my books and tore the cover off a whole bunch of other books in the field and threw them on the table so no one knew who had written them, and people just sat down to read them, I think a whole lot of these books would be all in one corner, and everybody would think they were all written by one person, even though there would be many writers involved. And then there would be a few of us on the other side [books that could have been written by no one else]."

The thing that sets Morrell apart from most of the horror and thriller writers around these days, I think, is the effect his literary background has had on his writing. Master's and doctor's degrees in American Literature and more than a decade of college teaching have left their mark. He shares some of the most powerful influences:

"I did my master's thesis on Ernest Hemingway's style [and then] my doctoral dissertation on an academic writer named John Barth [published by Penn State University Press as *John Barth: An Introduction* in 1976]. The two writers, in terms of craft and situation, who most influenced me, however, were James M. Cain, particularly *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and a British suspense writer named Geoffry Household, particularly a book called *Rogue Male* [written] in 1938, where a British big game hunter sets out to stalk Hitler. And he wrote, if you want to talk about non-supernatural horror, a book called *Dance of the Dwarves*. It's set in the rain forests in South America. It's slow to start; it sucks you in. Don't pay attention, and you'll miss it. But, oh, that is a terrifying book. I remember on first reading that I was just overwhelmed by it. It's quiet. It's not going to have eviscerations, but it's got the goods.

"For craft, for a sense of structure, for a sense of theory, for knowledge of viewpoint, and the way a story can be put together in architectural terms, I learned a tremendous amount from Henry James. Henry James was, to me, the consummate novelist. He may not have been very interesting at times, although I think *The Ambassadors* is a fascinating book. But boy, what he didn't know about writing, nobody else ever learned. He is a master, and they called him, at the time *the Master*. I am still adjusting to the things I learned from him. James was a master horror writer. Never mind *The Turn of the Screw*, which everybody knows, but there is a collection I think Leon Edel put out called, I think, *Henry James' Supernatural Stories*, or his *Ghost Stories* or something like that. James wrote expertly in the horror genre.

But today there is talk of horror dying; it seems it comes up every year. What does Morrell think of that?

"I found it very interesting that The Horror Writers of America chose *Silence of the Lambs* as the best novel of the year and then *The Throat*, and there is nothing supernatural in either. Now I don't mean to imply that supernatural horror is inferior; I don't think that at all. I think, however, there are more traps in terms of originality or lack of originality in that approach. A lot of writers who fell in love, let us say with *Dracula*, the novel, at a formative age, are spending the rest of their careers trying to rewrite *Dracula*. There are three novels, as we speak, that are replicating this *Dracula* experience that have just been published, and I looked at them, and, basically, they just don't speak to me. What I feel as I read them, however I might applaud the authors' effort and energy, is, I've been there before.

"Unless you have something new and drastic to add, in the way that Dan Simmons did in *Carrion Comfort*, where he reinvented the vampire story [don't bother]. He gave us a view and an approach and a depth, as much as it's frightening, a deep intellect at work here. Unless you can do that, I don't see any point in digging up material that's already been done.

"As a consequence, much of the interesting material that's been written in the horror field, has to do with non-supernatural horror, which gives them, I feel, a greater license. The trouble, however, in going in that direction, is that a lot of writers think that it's terribly original to write yet another serial killer story. Thomas Harris can get away with it because he's a genius. The rest of us, I dare say, had better steer far away from that subject matter. It's been done (forgive the pun) to death. We now need voices to come along with other drastically original notions which will push us in imaginative directions. Let's face it: One of the reasons we read horror is for the imagination. And to get retreaded stories isn't going to do it for me."

In an article for the *Rocky Mountain News* several years ago, I listed what were, for me, the ten scariest books of all time. Among them was *The Totem*. I wondered what books had really scared David Morrell.

"I will continue to be in awe of what Stephen King did in *'Salem's Lot*. I reread that book often. Here's another case. We've got vampires here. But Steve managed to redo it by saying to himself, what would happen if you crossed *Dracula* with *Peyton Place*? He added a new ingredient to the mix. He updated it and wrote it as if it

were a *Peyton Place,* and all of a sudden it's vampires, and very believable vampires. I was sweating through every moment of that book because I believed it.

"And then I think we would have to go back to *Dracula* itself, which I think is an immensely sophisticated book, particularly in the way he [Bram Stoker] allows his characters to use then modern technology to combat an ancient evil.

"I thought Thomas Tryon's *Harvest Home* was an excellent melding of local New England color with ancient fertility myths. He had really done his homework there. He had read Thomas Graves, and he had read all kinds of anthropologists. He replicated a mythology which was pretty ancient, and did it in such a believable way that it had a certain kind of Jungian truth to it. I think Tryon was an underrated writer. It's too bad he's gone from us now.

"And Robert Bloch is recently gone from us. With *Psycho* he altered the mind of an entire generation. I mean, no one who saw it, at least in my case (I don't want to be too general), having seen that film, I was never the same thereafter. I came face to face with evil and it affected me. To some, the equivalent later on was *The Exorcist,* the film, not the novel, which I thought was fairly tame."

Then where do we go from here? What are young writers to do?

"I wonder, for example, how many young people writing horror, have studied the classics. How many know *Frankenstein;* how many know *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde;* how many have read *The Picture of Dorian Gray*? When I decided to be a thriller writer, and when I decided to work in horror (and I don't know if there is that much difference the way I handle it), I deliberately set out to learn the history of the form. T.S. Eliot in his essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," has the notion that in order to move forward, you have to have absorbed all of the tradition that comes before you, and then sort of amass it all and put it into your work and then take that extra step that takes it into new territory. That means that other people will have to include you in the new tradition. I took classes in authors from the 1700s and moved forward, trying to read all of the important horror novels and tracing the history of the horror short story through the anthologies. And I did the same thing with thrillers. So that I have all kinds of ideas I get that I dismiss out of hand because I can think of two or three antecedents that are so important that I will look like I am ripping them off. So I'll just say, It was a good idea; it's too bad it isn't twenty years earlier, so that I could have done it. But I think some writers get these ideas and think: isn't this original? isn't this great? and then write the story. And somebody reads and says, 'I guess you didn't read *The Picture of Dorian Gray*?' And the writer says, 'Huh?' And the reader says, 'Oscar Wilde?' And the writer says, 'Who?' And it shows a tremendous lack of knowledge of the history of the genre, and of the craft. If writers would go ahead and do that research, I think we would get a lot more interesting fiction in the horror field."

We can count on David Morrell's stories to be on the top of the list where horror is concerned in the years to come. And I think we'll still see that one scene in his bestselling thriller novels where you can't help but say, "No he's not really going to do that; oh my God! he really is doing that;" and then down the blood comes. And then there's that moment where you say, "Oh that's really horrible!"

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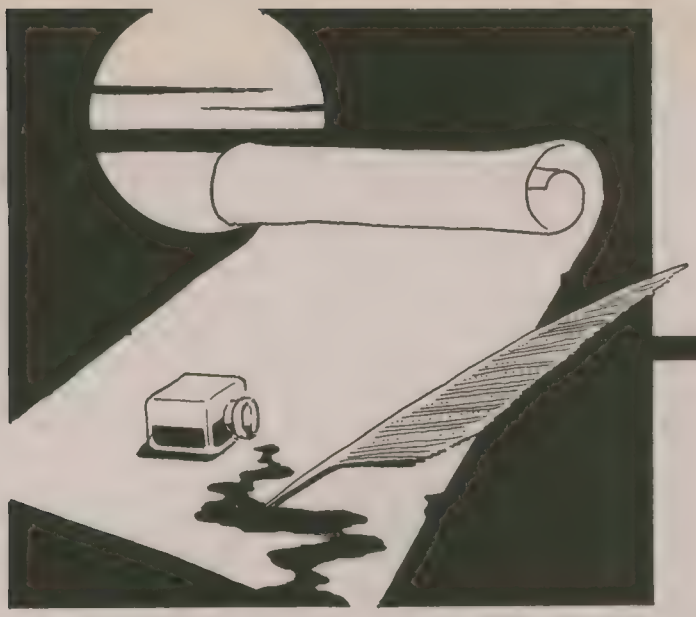

DOUGLAS E. WINTER

NIGHT LETTERS

INTERVIEW WITH THE TALTOS

Last fall, new novels by Stephen King and Anne Rice were linked with the seemingly inevitable word "horror." Although the label is convenient, it is not only confining — both writers work regularly beyond the bounds of a preconceived genre — but also misleading, since there is little in common in the fiction of today's bestselling male and female writers of the dark fantastic. To be sure, both King and Rice have written vampire novels, but the likelihood of confusing *Salem's Lot* and *Interview with the Vampire* is about the same as mistaking single malt scotch for champagne.

King writes from a decidedly populist perspective; he is a Faulkner by way of Jim Thompson, Don Robertson and Richard Matheson, with a lot of B movies and episodes of *Twilight Zone* and *Outer Limits* thrown in for good measure. The essence of his fiction is the disruption of everyday life by the outré: a funfair for the common man. Rice, on the other hand, finds her roots in fairy tales, medieval romances and gothic novels — particularly the decadent "yellow gothics" that closed down the nineteenth century. Her perspective is patrician; the fundamental icon of her work is the elevated Outsider, the one person among us who is fated to a life that cannot be mundane — not everyman, but neverman.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Rice's new novel, *Taltos* (Alfred A. Knopf, hardcover, $25.00), a romantic fantasy populated almost entirely by superhuman characters. Virtually devoid of the emotional aesthetics of horror — save for one skillfully enacted comeuppance — the novel is a curious amalgam of gothic, glamour fiction, alternate history and high soap opera.

Taltos is the third, and apparently final, book in a series known as the "Lives of the Mayfair Witches," and it is written with a rather firm expectation that its predecessors have been read. For the uninformed, it is enough to know that the members of the Mayfair family — women and men — are blessed and cursed by genetics with witchery. There is neither double double nor toil and trouble; indeed, the witches here seem adept only at mindreading and psychokinesis, talents which are too easily manipulated for plot convenience. Their haunted heritage has brought the family great wealth, which is exercised from a New Orleans manse with southern gentility; but of course such power cannot escape notice . . . or challenge.

The Mayfair saga unfolded laboriously in *The Witching Hour* (1990), but then seemed to find its stride with *Lasher* (1993), a deliciously decadent triumph that centered on the revelation that the mating of two Mayfairs could produce a genetic aberration from a legendary race of giants known as Taltos. Such a creature, the eponymous Lasher, wreaked havoc before dying in the second book; in *Taltos*, another member of the breed, Ashlar, takes center stage.

Ashlar, as his very name suggests, is the inverse of Lasher — a gentle giant who hides his monstrosity through Howard Hughes-like seclusion and philanthropy, making dolls for homeless children and orphans. He is also the consummate Rice creation: an immortal who yearns for integration into humanity and yet recognizes his aristocracy, which is symbolized strikingly by his height above the masses.

Ashlar is brought into contact with the Mayfairs through the antics of certain members of the

Talamasca, a secret society devoted to the pursuit of the weird. The confrontation of giant and witch is enacted in a heady hyperreality: from its settings — limousines and private jets, penthouses and bayou mansions, Claridge's in London — to its often luxurious prose, this novel grapples literally with the haunts of the very rich.

The story of Ashlar slowly intertwines with that of thirteen-year-old Mona Mayfair, a precocious nymphet who makes Lolita look like Doris Day. Mona manages a mutual fund, tosses off words like "approbation," seduces her cousin's husband and becomes pregnant by him without a care in the world — and why should she care? Neither the cousin nor anyone else seems to mind; indeed, every major player lusts after each other at some point in this book — even our pregnant thirteen-year-old ponders a lesbian tryst with yet another cousin.

Ironically, none of these sexual shenanigans seems particularly lurid or shocking; certainly we have seen them before in Rice's fiction. And that suggests the more fundamental problem confronting the reader of *Taltos*: the dire feeling of deja vu, of not moving forward but covering old ground. It is a problem amplified by a story that advances less through action than through the discussion and dissection of events, with characters talking each plot development into near-stasis.

At one juncture, Rice has her elegant Ashlar lament the modern corruption of language, dismissing "[r]ealism in fiction, and journalism which is filled with colloquialisms . . . It has lost all formality, and instead abides by an intense compression. When people write now, it is sometimes like the screech of a whistle compared to the songs they used to sing." If *Taltos* is meant to invoke some older and better style of storytelling, then its song of choice is a dirge. There are passages of intense lyricism here — particularly in the stories of ancient days told by Ashlar — yet too often Rice's style lingers and, on occasion, malingers.

This is a novel that demands both a taste — and a patience — that has been refined by prior experience. *Taltos* is thus likely to please the many fans of Anne Rice, but it is not likely to gain her any new readers; and this is a shame, because she is a formidable talent. Clearly it is time for her to sing a different kind of song.

† †

One more man is gone . . .

Several years ago, I was asked to write an obituary and remembrance of John Gardner, and my only recollection is that I didn't much like the results. The experience was harrowing, not because of personal feelings, but because I knew that my words were inadequate to convey any real sense of the man. When I was asked recently to write a memorial for Robert Bloch, I was paralyzed with despair; but I knew, thankfully, that there were many who knew Bob intimately, who could speak for him as well as about him. My voice, I reasoned, could add little to their weighty words. I declined to write about Karl Wagner for like reasons. We had huddled together in many smoke-filled rooms and bars, and though I liked Karl, I did not know him, not well enough for the kinds of words that seem to make a difference. But now I need to write something, an obituary of sorts and certainly a remembrance, about a man I never met and never knew. His name is Paul Monette.

The reason I feel this need is that many readers of this magazine have never heard of Paul Monette, while those readers who do know his name will likely know the Paul Monette who was eulogized in newspapers and magazines across the country: not a writer — or a man, really — but a kind of writer, a kind of man.

Paul Monette died four days ago (as I write), on February 10, 1995. He was 49 years old, but his death had been anticipated for almost a decade, when his longtime companion, Roger Horwitz, was diagnosed with HIV and, later, AIDS. Horwitz died in 1989; Monette spent the subsequent years chronicling his loss, making sense of life in the shadow of death. In his final days, Paul Monette wore the dubious but courageous sobriquet "gay writer." The headline of the *Washington Post* obituary went so far as to pronounce him a "writer of gay anguish," while most appreciations spoke of the ways in which Monette's writing opened the gates of the "gay world" to the "general public."

The insistent perception is that Monette's last books, for which he is rightfully renowned, proceeded from the given of his homosexuality, when in fact they proceeded from the given of his disease. *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir* is a brilliant, bitter chronicle of the devastation and death of his lover, and it gained for Monette both critical accolades and the wide readership that his earlier work had deserved but never received. *Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story*, the deeply moving autobiography of a life interrupted, earned Monette the 1992 National Book Award, for which his acceptance speech was very simple: "Writing literally kept me alive."

Sadly lost in the praise of the books born of Paul Monette's anguish is the fact that he was indeed a writer of fiction — a talented writer who eagerly traveled the worlds of horror and the fantastique. The obituaries do not tell us that Monette adapted Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu* in book form, or that he wrote the gritty noveliza-

tion of Brian De Palma's *Scarface* — two tie-ins distinguished by their sharp and intelligent prose. A more egregious oversight is the failure to mention Monette's exceptional horror novel, *Lightfall*. This cerebral, visionary nightmare, published early in the 1980s, has long since fallen out of print and, it would seem, out of mind.

On February 10, 1995, time ran out on a writer — not a "gay writer" and certainly not an "AIDS writer," but just a writer, one who spoke in sometimes quiet, sometimes funny, sometimes stark, sometimes desperate, words about the frailty of the human condition. That voice is lost, but Paul Monette's words will remain, not simply as a testament to a plague but also as a revery on life, love and loss.

One more man is gone, the singer tells us. One more man.

† †

Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS & the Media. By Simon Watney (University of Minnesota Press, trade paperback, $14.95). This is a sad but stirring commentary on the role that the advent of AIDS played in "justifying" censorship, and the role, in turn, that censorship has played in allowing the epidemic to spread. At its heart is a fundamental question: When is the dissemination of information — whether fact or fiction — harmful? Although his closing chapters devolve into polemic, Watney makes a compelling argument that the repression, rather than publication, of information is much more likely to harm lives and the public welfare. What is most astonishing about his narrative is its chilling truth — that, for example, in the early 1980s, Britain's chief medical officer was forced to use diplomatic pouches to smuggle AIDS information from the United States in order to avoid its seizure as "pornography" by British customs. This is an important study for those interested in our ever dwindling "right" of free speech.

† †

Queer Blood: The Secret AIDS Genocide Plot. By Alan Cantwell, Jr., M.D. (Aries Rising Press, P.O. Box 29532, Los Angeles, CA 90029, trade paperback, $12.95). There is information, and then there is disinformation . . . and sometimes, worse yet, non-information. Alan Cantwell, a dermatologist, has published several books contending that AIDS is the result of a U.S. government-backed conspiracy designed to eradicate unwanted minorities. According to Cantwell (who did not originate the theory), the pogrom began with the 1978-79 hepatitis B vaccine experiments of Dr. Wolf Szmuness — onetime roommate of the Roman Catholic priest who became Pope John Paul II. Try though he may, like most conspiracy theorists, Cantwell just can't connect the dots (but, of course, he is prevented from finding the truth because of the conspiracy). When read as fiction, this is a fascinating document; but any semblance to fact should be considered carefully, for what we have here is born less of knowledge than of frustration and rage.

† †

Corpse Killer. Directed by John Lafia (Digital Pictures, U-DIRECT INTERACTIVE FILM, for Sega, Macintosh, PC CD-ROM formats, approx. 60 hours, $59.95). After spending more than a year telling people that I refused to mount a game on my new computer, along comes the one game that cannot be refused: *Corpse Killer*, a cybernaut's version of a low-budget Italian horror film that seemed so much like me that someone bought it for me.

The player takes the role of a Special Forces officer who, with his strike team, parachutes into the zombie-infested island of Cay Noir. Your orders are to apprehend a renegade Pentagon scientist whose program to reanimate the dead has lost its funding (that's what happens when you start trying to balance the federal budget). The team falls into the scientist's hands, while you, hung up in a tree by your chute, are bitten and infected by a zombie. Enter Winston, your Rastaman contact, who serves as your guide into the unknown and locates helpful items like ammunition and ju-ju sticks. But then there's Julie, a photojournalist and babe who's either distracting you or trying to persuade you that a nefarious coverup is afoot. As the intrigue mounts, the zombies keep on coming, and it's your job to collect enough firepower and white magic to invade the mad doctor's laboratory, free your troops and find the cure for your infection. Much of the game takes the form of digitized video clips, with shooting arcade interludes with the walking dead as targets. Just like its zombies, *Corpse Killer* keeps coming at you. Get your burner ready, and remember:

Aim for the brain.

Douglas E. Winter
Alexandria, Virginia
February 1995

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WHEN THE SILENCE GETS TOO LOUD

BRIAN HODGE

BRIAN HODGE is well-known to *Cemetery Dance* readers as the author of dozens of top-notch short stories and many fine genre-bending novels, such as *Deathgrip* and *Nightlife*. Look for more Brian Hodge short fiction in the upcoming second volume of our *Thrillers* series.

My name is Greg, son of Jerry, who was son of Luther, son of Jefferson . . .

Ho.

Sounds like a laugh now, and I guess that's appropriate. The joke's on us, the new patriarchs. That's what we were going to be. Reclaiming what we'd lost, what we were so eager to blame the well-meaning women in our lives for civilizing out of us.

But reclamation of any kind is too far beyond us now. All I have left is this testimony to the elemental man within, who must be quite amused by now, and to my own soul. At this point I can finally afford the honesty—it's cheap enough.

My name is Greg, father of Kyle.

In all honesty I can say I don't hate him.

Not yet, at least.

Give me another hour, once the cords have cut into me a little deeper, and then we'll see how I feel.

September weekend in the Minnesota woods: they had chosen the dates as if possessed by the foresight of visionaries. The days bright, the weather fair, the nights dry. Roughing it had never been quite so pleasant.

Eight fathers and eleven sons, daughters left behind to tend hearth and home. Leave them to kitchens with their mothers, while men and man-children communed with the timeless, to discover the unifying ancient within them all. Better they seek it now, at the threshold of puberty and younger, than to find themselves wandering emasculated through the ripening fields of young adulthood.

It was the least fathers could do: steer their sons from the missteps that had so handicapped themselves. The revisionist bibles of these patriarchs were newer tomes: *Iron John* and *Fire in the Belly*, read and reread aloud to one another during weekly groups held in basements like tribal councils, and if a passage of great personal relevance brought a lump to the throat, or tear to the eye, that was well and good. Better still, a blessing. For they were men, and they were there for one another.

Minnesota woodland beckoned cool and pure, and they rolled behind the wheels of 4x4s and Suburbans. The rowdy youngsters, all between six and eleven, were gangly raw bundles of energy and nerves, tipped with burning fuses of caffeinated sodas and their healthy love of sanctioned mischief and a break in routine: their fathers had pulled them out of half a schoolday of Friday classes.

Greg Fischer walked among the newly-disembarked sons with a canvas bag held open wide. "Okay, that's it, turn 'em off. No more Gameboys until we head back Sunday evening. Drop 'em right here, that's it."

The order was at best grudgingly accepted, as if to merely contemplate the severance brought on symptoms of withdrawal. Kyle, ten, surrendered his most willingly, looking at his father and the bag with nonchalance that approached defiance. Saying, as it were, *See Dad, it doesn't hurt*. The boy had been like that all his life. After spankings, even. A kindergartner at stiff attention, glaring through brave tears like some proud five-year-old POW, announcing that it hadn't hurt, because he'd tightened up his bottom.

Supplies were unloaded, and tents pitched beneath pines that towered with the stately dignity of those who can afford to be so utterly indifferent to time. So lofty over men and boys and their air of the moment, breathe it quickly or it's stale.

Evening was quick upon their heels, then a night whose depth they never saw from their front doors. Theirs was a view fit to be witnessed from the mouth of a cave, the forest gripped by a deeper chill, dry and crisp, lit by the cool suns of other worlds, while nightbirds called and nocturnal paws were heard, never seen. They were surrounded, and it was holy, and they knew themselves to be its masters. Dominant males, naturally.

They dined on steaks, grilled over an open fire and foil-wrapped potatoes thrust into the glowing em-

bers. Sodas for the kids, beer for the fathers, and if the boys begged for a taste of the brew — forbidden at home by their mothers—out here it was okay. Out here there were no rules but instinct. Fitfully they drank, then tore the cans away from grins wide or hesitant, and seemed more proud of the resultant watery belches than anything.

"All right, guys, listen up," said Charlie Draper. "This next part is one of the most important rituals we'll be doing this weekend." In the workaday world Charlie tested eyes and fitted contact lenses. "We call this . . . The Naming of the Lineage. Because I tell you this, guys, if you don't know where you've come from, you can't ever really know who you are."

"And if you don't know who you are," added Zack Deitz, "then how you gonna know where you're *going*? Am I right?"

They ringed the fire with their bodies. Some standing, some squatting, some sitting on camp stools or lawn chairs brought from home. The fire and its steady crackle a beacon for their hearts, souls. Fathers' eyes wide as they beheld it like a pagan oracle, and so mesmerized, they began:

"My name is Charlie, son of Mitchell, son of Dean," said Draper.

"Ho!" cried the rest, a deep bark of masculine approval, and then Charlie lay a soft hand on his nine-year-old's shoulder, nodded down to him.

"My name is Chris, son of Charlie . . . son of Mitchell, um, son of Dean."

"Ho!"

Turning back to his father, then, both of them beaming from myopic eyes. On around the circle:

"My name is Greg, son of Jerry, son of Luther, son of Jefferson." The names became arcane words from a conjuring spell, spoken amongst the assembly with a reverence that gave them their power. While they had always meant something to Greg, something bordering on the sacred, there was no denying that out here under trees and night they meant far more.

"Ho!"

The pride became a living entity; he could feel it in his chest, his throat. Even before he had identified this longing, all he'd ever *really* hungered for, of lasting significance, was to pass down his heritage to a succeeding generation.

He had sired well — this seed before him, grown so tall. Made so like him in his own image. And then again, so not.

Greg nodded.

"My name is Kyle, son of Greg, son of Jerry, son of Luther, son of Jefferson."

"Ho!"

On around the assembly it went, names pealing like the chimes of bells, in voices high and low. Once the patriarchal roads that had brought them all to this night had been named, several of the fathers went to the vehicles to retrieve the drums. And bring them round the fire.

Cheaply made, most of them. Inferior hide stretched taut over inferior hollows, and lashed firm with rawhide. Men who, in their family lives, were more at home in offices and stockrooms, garages and boardrooms, sat joyfully in the dirt, bellies full of warm meat and cold drink, and haphazardly pounded out simple rhythms in celebration of themselves and the night.

Greg looked up from his drumming to grin at Kyle, who rolled his eyes as he watched his father leap up. Thrusting the cudgel at his son, passing the torch, then sitting him at the drum to carry on, while Greg massaged kinks from his lower back, then hurled himself toward the fire. Arms and legs in abandon, to tread a shuffling path around the blaze with the bolder of the others.

He found dance a language beyond race, beyond time. So very human, on fundamental levels best left open to hear the whispers and roars of the divine.

Greg just hoped his knees would hold out.

For tomorrow would be grand.

Tomorrow they would hunt.

It comes upon you when you're out like this, away from the city, or even the smallest of towns: the sense of walking through something ageless, that you'll never understand. And in its eyes you're no more than a maggot, squirming in the home you've made in the carcass of what used to be more wilderness, and has since become pavement and tract housing.

I suppose, as fathers go, I'd been lax about exposing Kyle to this other world. Always figured there'd be time. Sure, we'd driven past it, and I'd turn around and chew him out from behind the wheel if he pitched trash out the window. Sure, he'd seen it on TV, in movies. But never first-hand.

So I have to wonder if maybe. After ten years, the first time a kid comes face-to-face with unspoiled wilderness he isn't hit a lot harder than his old man.

And, since there's less wilderness each passing year, if whatever spirit it is in the forest that makes us feel so humble gets a little more concentrated for every acre it's forced to retract in upon itself.

It's a theory.

Morning found grumpy risers among fathers and sons alike. Coffee was passed around with a value higher than gold. Bacon and eggs sizzled in skillets while, hunters all, they dressed for the day.

Zack Deitz was the unofficial leader of Saturday's hunt. He owned the most guns.

"We're going after a deer or two today," he called out for the benefit of the boys. "And I bet cash money not a one of you fellows has ever stalked a deer before.

Am I right? Lemme see the hands of my experienced hunters."

None were raised.

"Do squirrels count?" asked one boy, finally.

Zack grinned, fist over heart. "You bet they do. But a deer's different. Squirrels, they don't look at you with big brown eyes, and I don't want any mama's boy crying about Bambi, you hear me? Used to, the man was the *hunter* of the family. If the man didn't go out and bring back the meat, the family went hungry. *Now* we can buy it all nice and bled clean for us, cut and wrapped in plastic and kept nice and cool . . . but it's not the same. Boys, I tell you . . . getting so I can't even bring myself to eat a package of meat my wife brings home from the supermarket. Just doesn't *taste* right anymore. . .

"'Cause nothing tastes better than your own kill. That's why we're here. So we can remember what's it's like to be hunters."

One tentative hand was raised. "Sir?"

"Yeah, Bobby?"

"Deer season doesn't start for another few weeks."

Zack Deitz grinned with wicked arched eyebrows, patted the stock of his Remington. "The deer doesn't know that. The rifle doesn't either." He shook his head, spat tobacco juice over one shoulder. Getting deadly serious again. "You think the Indians used to care if it was deer season or not? The hunters that used to live in caves, you think they cared about some rule called deer season? That's the problem today, too many rules about things that got *no* business having rules made about 'em. You can't put a rule on hunger. Can't put rules on eating. It's not natural. We're here because *we* obey a law that runs a whole lot deeper than any rule some game warden says."

They were off in a quarter-hour, some with rifles, others unarmed and tramping along merely for the thrill of the hunt. It was a miracle that this platoon did not drive away all wildlife well in advance of its own footfalls. But at last:

The sighting of the white bobtail flashing through the trees, strong thin legs bounding with a grace bestowed only by nature . . . and taken with speed so remotely fierce it could only belong to man. Heavy recoil of rifles into shoulders, rolling crack of the shots and the powder smell thick in their nostrils, gunsmoke wreathing heads like victory laurels.

The sanctified hush of life in the forest come to an abrupt standstill as the deer paused, stunned into insensibility, wounded above the front shoulder. It staggered forward, once, twice, its hesitant attempts to walk reminiscent of a fawn's, then buckled onto its side with twitching legs. Its bowels jetted mortality and the deer fell still. The hunters gathered, holy mass in a green cathedral.

Zack Deitz slit the animal's throat with a heavy knife, pulled the triangular head back to widen the slash, and the blood spilled rich and hot.

As one by one, the boys lined up to have him trace a bold streak of red along each cheek.

Victors, they returned to camp with the field-dressed deer lashed to a stout greenwood branch, borne on shoulders. Men and boys alike stepped jauntier than hours before, little weariness left considering their hours of tramping through the woods.

"Dad?" said Kyle, walking alongside. While the deer was being gutted he'd amused himself by borrowing a knife to sharpen a branch into a crude spear, and now carried it back to camp. Point up, but there would be no chastisements. *Don't carry it that way, you'll fall and put an eye out* were words left at home.

"Yeah?" said Greg.

"Did the deer hurt much?" He spoke with a ten-year-old's near-clinical fascination with mortality. Kids could so often distance themselves at that age.

"Some. But not for long. It was over quick."

"Do you think it minds that we'll eat it?"

Greg smiled, his sense of fatherhood warming over an entirely new fire, too rarely stoked: he, a mentor whose wisdom was sought to make sense of a world where there were but two classes; victor and vanquished. "It doesn't think that way, like we do, Kyle. Out here almost everything's food for something else. There's a simple beauty in that. and if that's the fate an animal meets, well, most of the time it'll give up. Instinct tells it to accept."

Walking side by side, Kyle turned this over in his mind. Then: "Do I have to wash the blood off my face when I get home?"

Greg nodded. "I think your mom would appreciate that, don't you?"

"How come? If I bring something home from school — a paper or like that? — she sticks it on the refrigerator. How come this is different?"

Greg laughed. At Kyle's age they all had a concept of logic and justice that was so simple. Wonderful in theory, essentially unworkable in its purity; too bad. "It just is. Moms don't understand things like getting blooded after your first hunt."

"So . . . if we don't get to *look* any different when we go home . . . what's the good of coming out here at all?"

Greg patted him on the chest, then had to look twice at him. Such a change, the addition of two streaks of red on his cheeks. Above them Kyle's eyes were an older boy's, and, surprisingly, it was not such a welcome sight after all. The first true foretaste Greg had had of someday being handed his walking papers.

How bitter, how sweet. To do your job right meant to strive for your own eventual obsolescence.

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He patted Kyle's chest again. "So you can feel it in here. Where it really counts."

Kyle nodded, reluctant, anything but convinced. He found a scattering of fallen leaves, kicked them with petulance. "Sucks," he said quietly.

Greg found a certain wisdom in that, too.

The camp was split that evening when dusk claimed the forest for its own. Two fires blazed in rings of stone; the boys had wanted one for themselves, and their fathers heartily agreed it was a fine idea. Men in the making, were they not?

Kyle watched his father and the others, some thirty feet away. Boisterous and frequently roaring with hilarity, all of them hoisting beers and indulging in back-slapping intimacy. Talking of the closing baseball season, the coming football season. Women on TV and in the movies. Prostate glands.

Kyle turned back to their own fire, smaller . . . yet somehow a more thoughtful fire. Chad Deitz tended and fed it with devotion that bordered on the religious. They gazed quietly into its depths, muted orange light reflecting from solemn faces. The hard glint of eyes, the dried maroon rite of passage still streaking every cheek, lifeblood of an animal which had forfeited itself to feed their bodies for a night, their spirits forever.

"What do you think Hell's like?" Kyle asked.

The other ten looked at him. Some quizzical, some surprised. A couple of the youngest with hesitant awe: he had said a word they were not allowed to speak at home.

"In Hell I bet you have to stay after school every day," said Chris Draper.

"The weather's always your least favorite season," this from Bobby Reinsert.

"They make you eat seconds on vegetables," Chad Deitz said, then his brother Matt shoved his shoulder and said, "No, all they serve is Brussels sprouts!" And one and all were repulsed.

Adam Golding made his bangs cockeyed with his fingers. "If you get a dumb haircut, it never grows out again."

"Then *you're* in Hell *already*!" his older brother Coy said.

"And they never let you see the end of your favorite TV shows," came another voice from the outer circle, and this thought seemed to wound them as none other. Then they all laughed, at first skittishly, then with more assurance. Self-awareness.

A small shift in wind sent woodsmoke drifting toward Kyle's face, and he shut his eyes. Breathed it, did not cough. Like his lungs were *made* for it, drew something from it that older lungs could never strain.

How warm would it be tomorrow? Just once he would like to strip away his clothes, cover himself head to toe with mud, crouch still and silent beside quiet waters and see what his reflection looked like. The woods did that to you, he figured. Made you think of things you'd never even consider at home. Like a song you could never hear as long as a roof hung over your head.

Out here you were forced to listen . . . which was okay, because you *wanted* to. Not like school, where you had no choice and some days that made you want to throw some teacher down the stairs for it, just for underestimating you. Treating you like a baby.

The darker it got, the louder that song played. And these wusses got shook up by the thought of missing the end of their favorite shows?

"I think in Hell," said Kyle, very slowly, and even the two eleven-year-olds in their circle quieted and paid attention, as if the right to speak had always been his, "you have to grow up and listen to a million people telling you what you should be like, no matter how stupid it sounds. And you can tell just by looking at them they don't know what they're talking about."

Silence; just the feeding fire and the loud wet laughter from thirty feet away.

Kyle hitched a thumb over his shoulder, and the others looked at their fathers, who they were. Illuminated by the fresh light of old wisdom and young eyes.

"They're full of shit, you know."

And the other boys shrugged, then gave sheepish nods, one at a time, even the littlest ones, as if, yes, they'd known that all along.

When I was in college, in my fraternity, we used to have very concrete ideas on what separated men from boys. Most of them involved alcohol, and the number of pubic scalps you claimed to dangle from your belt, belonging to members of our sister sorority or women we met at parties or the Greek bars.

We were wrong. I recognized that in time. But I miss those days, if not for their ideals, at least for their simplicity. We had an outlook and we stuck with it. It was only when I was out in the real world that it all got so confusing.

Trying to find out what it meant to be a man, what answer would satisfy everybody. Going through life, then, attempting to become the epitome of the sensitive male, and wondering why so many women still seemed attracted to the abusers and reprobates. Becoming one on those for a while, and wondering why I felt so lousy about myself. Starting a family, finally, and wondering why I woke up one day and realized I never truly knew what I was.

But realizing I wasn't alone. A lot of others out there were just as confused as I was. For so long we'd been told who and what we were, what the women in our lives wanted us to be . . . was it any wonder we eventually turned to one another? We all sought that elemental male, that primal hairy man, buried inside each of us and who had been stilled for so long that we'd come to find his silence deafening.

How sure we were of ourselves, that we knew how to recapture the elusive bastard. Through shared memories and celebration of our fathers and grandfathers, through ceremony and ritual.

Ho ho ho.

We were as lost as we ever were. Worse, I think. Because we didn't know it. The idiot with the wrong map is usually worse off than the idiot with none.

How clear that must have been to our sons.

Who saw, instead of patriarchs, pretenders.

And how clear that must have been to the primal man, buried so deep, beyond the reach of neurosis. The primal hairy man who looked out from within us all and recognized only in whose hearts he would find the warmest caves.

Dawn brought perplexity, confusion, and finally panic.

Fathers awakened to discover that their sons were missing, all of them, from the oldest to the youngest. Sleeping bags still conformed to the earlier shape of their bodies, but no longer held their warmth.

Amid the mounting babble of fathers' voices — some charged with grave annoyance, others worry — Greg tried his best to remain a center of calm. There was a reason for this, all they need do was look for hints as to what the boys might have done.

Had they gone hunting on their own? someone asked. Unlikely. No guns had been taken. Gone off somewhere for a more private breakfast, a continuance of their own solitary little powwows from last night? Again, unlikely; the food supply was unpilfered.

Someone suggested wolves, and even though it was a perfectly ludicrous explanation, it nevertheless gave them a moment's taste of supreme terror. Minnesota's woods were home to well over a thousand, and they could be heard at night this far north, their cries from the very heart of desolation. Only after that initial grip of unease was the ridicule heaped, but the moment was enough: the damage had been done to their nerves.

"Hey. Look. What's with the drums?" Charlie Draper was over by one of the Suburbans, fists on hips, looking down in confusion.

Their tribal drums lay in an unceremonious jumble. Hollows open top and bottom, the stiff hides beside them like a pile of discarded tissues.

"The lacings," someone said. "They took the rawhide lacings."

Zack Deitz swore. Boys will be boys, they all knew that, all *cherished* that. But desecrating the drums, now *that* was just too much to tolerate.

Fathers' voices took to the air, calling for their sons, then waiting, calling again. Never a reply. The boys were either out of earshot or were refusing to answer, and Greg passed the next hour with urgently mounting distress as they fixed their breakfast eggs and sausages and coffee while waiting for their sons to return. Perhaps the scent of food would lure them back.

An hour, though, was quite enough, by unanimous quorum. This had ceased to be cute. Or funny. Or dismissed as the serendipity of youth. This was rude and disrespectful, and any kid thinking it would be tolerated had another thing coming.

They would go out and find their sons, bring them back like men, fugitives to face their crimes. They needed someone to linger back at the camp, though, in case the wayfarers slipped past their fathers and returned unseen. Someone would have to keep them here. Brent Piercy was chosen, since he had bunions, and blisters from yesterday's hunt. He seemed relieved.

The other seven laced their boots and began a northerly trek, back into that deeper woodland walked yesterday. There was much talk of what to do once the boys were found. Cutting the weekend short with most of Sunday before them would suit the crime, if they were here primarily for the boys' sake . . . but what a shame to penalize themselves that way. Hell, this was God's country.

Make the boys sit out the rest of the day in the vehicles, then. Time out, like a penalty box. Without their damn Nintendos.

On they walked, north, driven almost by instinctive impulse, some deep-rooted knowledge that this was the direction their sons had gone. As if they could smell the passage lingering in the air, a scent trail left by bodies they had seen grow from tiny babies, small enough to be seated in a cupped pair of father's hands.

So much forest, so much. Greg found it easy to liken it to the imponderables of deep space. The slippery chore of trying to grasp the idea of space going on forever, without containment. No wall or boundary ahead to mark its end, the beginning of something new. Just more of the same, eternally. Like these trees, coaxed ever higher by the pull of decades and centuries, and the forest floor, rich with the rot of forever.

Greg felt the pendulum swing, a slow passage of hours marked by the shortening of the trees' shadows, until they were but dark puddles beneath a noonday sun. Then they began to lengthen again, in the opposite direction. Shadows reaching for the cusp of night, and the longer they got, the more it seemed that everyone out here was a babe in the woods.

The fathers began to find the clothes in late afternoon — a shoe tossed here, a shirt dropped there — and the growing catalogue of punishments began giving way to a hunger to simply clutch their sons again. Hold them close, smell them, rub in the reassurance of their existence.

"This is Chad's," said Zack Deitz, of a small blue sweatshirt held in both hands. Looking up, then, at the others, so much unsaid, but then, where was the need? They were all feeling the same things. "Getting late, we better split up . . ."

Greg went wherever Deitz pointed him; Deitz was the hunter, Dietz should know. The wisdom of fatherhood, to Greg, seemed in this moment very much an inflated concept. His son was missing and he could not take charge, wishing only for someone more skilled than he to tell him where to look, what to do. Wanting a stronger back than his to bear this terrible apprehension.

Walking. Walking. Feet crunching leaves, twigs, the shadows straining before him even as he watched. Daylight didn't just die in woods this deep—it was murdered, and bled black. Hearing, near and far, voices of fathers calling for sons. Supplanted, though, by the more distant howls of some wolfpack. A chorus shrill and mournful fit to chill the spinal fluid of any two-footed listener, overlapping into a tapestry of savage eloquence, and a nobility which these seekers of the primitive could never hope to touch.

He was going in circles. Snagging himself on thorns and underbrush, staring at trees whose spread of branches looked familiar. Had he passed them just five minutes ago, ten? Made different now, though, by waning light? New shadows came to fill the void? While even the voices of his brethern dwindled.

He turned his head. Off to his right, a sound, faint. The tender whimper of a child, frightened by evening and crouching in guilt? Greg broke his hesitant stride, tore past trees and ferns and rotting logs, and the sound grew louder, he was homing in with unerring accuracy—

And found him. Charlie Draper, the optometrist nearly blind without his glasses. Tied against a tree, back-first, so tightly he might as well have been moss. Blinking madly, and words were beyond him, Greg could see that now. A rawhide strip had been lashed so tightly across the corners of his mouth that his lips were skinned back over his teeth in a painfully grotesque rictus.

Impulses were many and conflicting: To help, to run, to seek out the others. But in the wild, Greg dimly understood, such a moment of hesitation often becomes the terminator line between victor and vanquished.

And just before they blindsided him, to make swift work of his skull and knees with their crude bludgeons, he at least caught glimpses: flashes of their young bodies, quick and lithe, thickly caked with mud. And their eyes, crazed by some hunger that went deeper than bellies.

When he awoke, Greg realized he was in the same predicament as Charlie Draper had been. Made a part of some tree, tied around the torso and legs with vines; arms stretched around back, wrists lashed together on the far side of the trunk. The rawhide lacing around his wrists and face and neck had been tied while wet, very tight, and Greg sobbed. As it dried, it would begin to shrink, and tighten even more. Painful? Excruciating would be no exaggeration before long. Where had the boys learned that trick? Had it just come to them? Had they tilted their heads to the night and trees, and listened?

Then he remembered: Someone had, when they were making their drums, said the finished instruments would be far more resonant if the rawhide heads and lashings were soaking wet when tied over the frames. The suggestion had been voted down—too much time before they'd be able to start pounding them.

Greg was guessing he and the rest had been tied far from one another, for better isolation. He remembered seeing the boys passing through the trees, once, before he'd come fully conscious again. Retaining this image of them, thin and spindly-legged, somehow more powerful in their nudity, total or near, than they had ever appeared when he'd seen them in Little League uniforms. Smeared with mud, they looked to be from another culture entirely, and a few carried torches made from branches and leaves, and rags that might once have been clothing.

And of course, they gave deference to a chieftain.

My Kyle.

What we, as fathers, had hoped to find out here, maybe it came effortlessly to our sons. As much as it hurts to admit it, maybe we were too far gone.

Or maybe what we'd hoped to find is more sentient than I ever gave it credit, and by force or stealth it took our sons, mind and heart and soul. Whispering to them in the night, in their dreams.

Or maybe we just drove them crazy ourselves, with our sad games.

Whatever happened to them, should I hate our sons because they fulfilled our purpose the only way that made sense to them? Isn't mythology full of elders usurped by their sons?

Maybe it's best this way, that they start by making a clean break, claiming their heritage by force. And leaving us, their sacrificed fathers, to rot on our trees, our bones like primitive totems to remind them where they'd come from.

And so I wait. Strangulation and dehydration will claim us long before any searchers will find us.

And so. I wait. Still unable to hate my son.

Hoping only that, before I die, I can at least manage to find that long-lost child inside myself. Turn him loose, set him free.

Because it's never too late to learn.

— CD

MATTHEW J. COSTELLO

NIGHTMARE ALLEY

As I write this, filming recently completed on *Bombmeister. Bombmeister,* starring Jeffrey Jones, is an interactive theatrical film that I wrote with F. Paul Wilson. The film has fifty-plus different endings, was mind-wrenchingly difficult to create—and yet it was great fun to do . . . a real, er, blast.

Undeterred by the insanity of scripting monstrously large branching stories, we're about to write another interactive film set in a research station in deep ocean abyss . . . .

And beginning to work on that has put me in mind of the great goofy flicks of the fifties, a time of cheesy thrills and chills, over-sized bugs and aliens with an attitude.

Where, one wonders, did that explosion of horror and sf come from?

I've got an answer. Let me start by warning the more conservative film buffs who may be reading this column that my thesis is bound to raise a few eyebrows. To wit:

It was Howdy Doody that played a major role in the sf and horror explosion of the fifties.

Now hold onto your coonskin hats a second before you label me insane. There are no body parts under my floorboards. Hear me out, gentle reader, and you'll learn how cleverly I figured this out (while the old man's heart was *beating* away in my brain!).

After the golden age of the thirties with James Whale's wonderful *Frankenstein* (and its wonderful sequel, the infamous *Bride)* and a stodgy but atmospheric *Dracula* . . . we came to the forties. And despite the efforts of Val Lewton, sf and horror were pretty much relegated to those silly but loveable exercises in credulity called serials.

There was, though, a landmark of sorts . . . a film that ended the two decades and set the stage for the tremendous genre explosion of films in the fifties.

It was, improbably enough, *Abbott & Costello Meet Frankenstein.* This movie, Universal's last effort to pump some more money out of the once-lucrative Frankenstein well, played with all of James Whale's Expressionistic conventions. The brooding hallways, the shadowy lighting . . . but the locale this time was Florida, and the warm light of Abbott & Costello's humor cuts through the musty air like a German cleaning-frau on a rampage.

But the Abbott & Costello series signalled the end of one era. Through its humor, playing with the "boos," it suggested that it was time for something new.

And, class, now we come to my thesis.

What turned around the moribund genre of the horror and sf films? What made genre films the money-makers that attracted every major studio (and dozens of minor ones) to launch sf and monster films, with big ants, monsters from space, and the gimmicky chills of William Castle?

It was (and I suggest sitting down for this) the responsibility of none-other than Howdy Doody, TV Personality and marionette, Doodyville's most famous resident.

And I don't make that claim lightly.

In 1948 RCA and General David Sarnoff, Chairman of the Board at RCA, was trying to get the new medium of television to penetrate the American home. It was

no longer new, and yet it hadn't made the expected inroads. Wrestling, concerts, and the occasional dramatic special just didn't do the trick.

Enter Howdy. Sarnoff asked his popular NBC radio host, one Bob Smith from Buffalo, to put together a program for a then largely-ignored audience . . . children. Bob Smith created a show around a character featured on his radio program. He had a marionette constructed—a surprisingly ugly hayseed who was "Howdy Doody" only for the first season. The rest, as they say, is history.

Smith launched a campaign to have the kids elect Howdy president in 1948, and the show's popularity exploded. If a kid had a TV, other neighborhood kids swarmed around his house anxiously waiting for the early evening show.

They badgered their parents into buying TVs, and moms were quick to discover the advantage of having the rug rats occupied while she prepared dinner. (Remember: this was the fifties we are talking about. Moms really did that back then).

And can't you just see it now . . . Kraft Macaroni and Cheese, and Spam, all cooked on a shiny white Kelvinator stove?

The pull of Howdy was irresistible. The Howdy Doody Show became a licensing phenomenon, with Howdy's new image (the familiar freckly-faced boy, unveiled in 1949) appearing on jam jars, bread wrappers, shoes, games, and toys.

Thanks to Howdy, television arrived.

And here's where we get to the strange part of the story.

Now that TV was in America's homes, there had to be programs for the adults. So the kids got Howdy Doody, while their parents watched Uncle Milty and Sid Caesar and a host of other programs, many now lost from that era before videotape.

And the motion picture—America's Entertainment!—started dying. The box-office plunge started in the late forties, but really picked up speed in the early years of the fifties. The 15,000 TV sets of 1947 had grown, so that when Howdy Doody inaugurated the New York-Chicago coaxial cable, the show would reach an audience of nearly eighteen million viewers.

But by June of 1950, weekly movie box office hit a new low—sixty million—the worst since the depression in 1932. Then, in 1951, 700 theaters closed nation-wide.

What to do?

Hollywood had to offer something that couldn't be found on television. First they tried widescreen Cinemascope (or Superscope, or VistaVision, or any one of a dozen other different wide-angle film ratios). Then 3-D, which actually worked for a while.

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And finally, for drive-in and matinees everywhere, horror and science fiction. These films appealed to the burgeoning crop of boomer kids who were growing up in the fifties. They offered spectacle and shocks far removed from the safe cozy world of *The Life of Reilly* and *The Loretta Young Show.* (No big ants on Reilley, no tentacles wrapped around Loretta Young).

SF and horror were perfect films for the explosion of drive-ins across the country . . . a few chills and spills to get your poodle-skirted sweetheart snuggling real close.

So, it was like the scene from *The Wild One,* with Marlon Brando as the sleek, snarling prototypical biker. Someone asked Brando what he was rebelling against . . . and he answered, his eyes rolling up, "What'ya got?"

America's youth, in the illusory calm of the fifties, asked Hollywood the same question.

And the answer, to all of our delight, was "scary movies . . . ."

If you've read my books, you can probably guess what my favorite icon for that era is . . . .

While benevolent aliens would arrive in droves in Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *E.T.,* filmmakers in the fifties knew that aliens were bad news . . . . The dark paranoia of the sunny Eisenhower years were well represented by a decidedly grim film called *The Thing.*

The Thing (Winchester Pictures/RKO, 86 min., 1951) was also called *The Thing (from Another World)* after Phil Harris released a popular song called "The Thing." Author and director Michael Crichton called it, "The best science fiction film ever made," but when it was released the sf community attacked it for what film historian Phil Hardy describes as a "Radical betrayal of its source."

That source is a chilling story called "Who Goes There?" written by *Astounding* magazine editor John W. Campbell. And yes, the film does ignore the most fascinating aspect of Campbell's powerful story, namely the alien's ability to mimic the appearance of any other life form. This duplicity was a central theme to films of the fifties, but 1951 may have been just a tad early for a full-blown treatment of the idea.

But Campbell's oppressive Arctic environment and the tremendous sense of isolation of a small group under siege were all admirably captured by *The Thing.*

It's not the straight-forward story of an alien monster that sets *The Thing* apart. The direction, though credited to Christian Nyby, shows the hand of producer Howard Hawks. The anxious looks exchanged between characters, the overlapping dialogue that grows harder and harder to understand as the danger grows, are all Hawks' trademarks.

When asked who directed the film, Kenneth Tobey, who plays the cool-headed Captain Patrick Hendry, replied "Howard Hawks." Though Nyby did the actual on-site directing, he explained, Hawks rehearsed the scenes and oversaw the whole project.

The film is important for more than its tight direction. When the head scientist Carrington describes the alien as having "No pleasure . . . no pain . . . no emotions, our superior in every way," he voices a central theme of fifties sf. Feelings, never in question before now, became central to a consideration of what's human . . . and what's alien.

And how you felt, man, would become a dominant motif in the feel-good psychedelic era, as the kids from the fifties staged their psychedelic cultural revolt.

The film also introduces a nouveau expressionism, with the technical apparatus of the base, its Quonset huts and metallic corridors, serving the same function that the shadowy corridors of Baron Frankenstein's castle did.

Science is not friendly here. Carrington risks everyone's life in the interest of "Knowledge . . . more important than life." Science and scientists are presented as misguided, even dangerous. And the universe, its aliens and the unknown, are even more unhealthy.

The fear and paranoia of the fifties would find more explicit depictions than in this black and white film, but it started, powerfully, right here.

Ridley Scott's film *Alien* came to prowl similar territory to *The Thing.* (It also masterfully teased us with such quick views of the alien). The crew on board the Nostromo talked with the same natural patter found in Hawks' film. They too are isolated, facing a voracious alien bent on their destruction.

And remember the scene in *Frankenstein* when Fritz comes to torture the monster with fire . . . . In *The Thing,* the "fire" of electricity is used to attack the alien, and ultimately destroy it as it melts into the ground, under a trio of flashing electric arcs, sizzling into a dark, smudgy pile whose odor we can only guess at.

This, then, was the new wicked witch, coming at us this time from outer space. There could only be more on the way, as Scotty, the film's stereotypical reporter warns, at the end of *The Thing,* we'd better "Keep Watching the Skies!"

Just as we were told in the McCarthy years, we'd better watch our neighbor too . . . .

But those of us who watched Howdy Doody getting tricked by Mr. Phineas T. Bluster knew that neighbors could be very tricky indeed.

"A Conversation with Dan Simmons"

Trey R. Barker

Few names in fiction can, by themselves, tell a reader so much. The name Dan Simmons can. Simply hearing it will offer a reader certain truths: that almost any trip with Simmons as guide will be wonderful; that it will probably be a trip filled with awards and critical praise. But the name alone won't tell the reader *where* the trip is going: the land of vampires, the land of bitch-goddesses with foul tempers, the datum-plane of cyberspace, or the quiet solitude of a rudderless space program. Over a recent cup of coffee, Simmons talked about his latest horror novel.

CEMETERY DANCE: Any beginning comments on the new book, *Fires Of Eden*? Opening arguments, thoughts off the top of your head?

DAN SIMMONS: No opening argument whatsoever. The book has to speak for itself. It's about as close as anything I've ever written to attempting to be pure beach reading; just for the fun of it.

CD: I'd heard there was a little disagreement between you and the publishers over the title. It was originally *Pele's Fire.*

SIMMONS: There were disagreements between me and everybody. Everybody thought *Pele . . .* that everybody would believe it was a biography of the soccer player.

CD: I tested that theory. About 90 percent of the people I talked to thought of the soccer player.

SIMMONS: Yeah, I did my own testing. But I refused to change the title until I came up with something that I felt was equal to it. *Pele's Fire*'s not the greatest title, but at least it explained what the book was about. So, I finally thought of *Fires Of Eden.*

CD: You once mentioned that most horror doesn't have a point at which the victims realize they're victims and then do something about it. *Fires Of Eden*'s Cordelia did realize it.

SIMMONS: Yeah, somebody who actually refused to be victimized beyond the necessity. Cordie's an old friend of mine, she appeared as an eleven-year-old kid in the book *Summer Of Night,* so I was interested to see how she had aged. I was sorry to see she had cancer as this book opens. There's nothing funny about that, even though the book is supposed to be humorous. But that's part of her attitude, too. She's not going to be victimized by anything if she can help it. She won't go gently in that good night, either because of the monsters attacking her or cancer. She's my example of somebody who won't accept the inevitable.

CD: I got a bit of that from the character Eleanor, but not as much. She seems more passive, not as aggressive as Cordelia.

SIMMONS: Well, Eleanor's a quiet person, but I enjoyed creating a female lead protagonist like her because I think she had some contradictions and complexities which not all beach books have. I think she had a lot of resolve. She ended up not being in the primary action at the end of the book which was a surprise to me as well as to Eleanor. She's a college professor, so there has to be a little bit of thoughtful inaction on her part.

CD: Was there a lot of thoughtful inaction when you were a professor?

SIMMONS: I was just a teacher. There's not much thoughtful there, you just teach kids.

CD: Why did you leave teaching to write?

SIMMONS: I always knew I wanted to write, I just hadn't planned on doing it that seriously for a lot of years. The last four years I taught, I was an administrator of gifted and talented programs. Then I took a sabbatical to write, and the district, as all school districts like to do, liked to show their teachers nobody's indispensable, that everybody can be rotated, that anybody can do any job. They rotated me out after I went on sabbatical. I was supposed to go back to the same school I taught

twelve years at, and I thought: No, I don't want to do that. So I just quit and started writing full-time.

CD: Was this before or after *Song Of Kali*?

SIMMONS: It was after *Kali*, but it was before I earned any money, really. "River Styx" won a *Twilight Zone* contest in 1982, my daughter was born in '82, and then *Song Of Kali* came out in 1985. And that's all that was out when I quit in 1987. I thought *Carrion Comfort* was coming out, but Blue Jay Books went under. They bought *Carrion Comfort* and they went under. It went to TOR Books, they waited eighteen months and couldn't decide what to do with the manuscript, and I finally had to buy the book back. So instead of having that extra money from *Carrion Comfort*, I ended up using all my retirement money to buy the book back and went with a small publisher, Dark Harvest in Chicago, which didn't pay me anything. So we were below flat broke. We were in desperate shape.

CD: Sounds like the early years of Stephen King: working in the laundromat and his wife working at the doughnut shop.

SIMMONS: I love that story, you've probably read about it. When he got the news that *Carrie* had sold to paperback for a small fortune and also he sold the movie rights to Brian DePalma, he didn't know what to do, so he galloped across the big four lane highway where he lived in the trailer to buy a blow dryer at K-Mart because theirs had been broken. And then coming back, he stood on the median, he said for a half an hour, because he was sure he'd get hit by a car.

CD: Getting back to *Fires Of Eden*. The ending wasn't a standard formula-driven wrap-up. You didn't deal with Byron Trumbo in the way I expected. Did you have any trouble with the editors over that because it wasn't the obvious emotional payoff?

Photo Credit: Karen Simmons

SIMMONS: I saw *Thelma and Louise* and I didn't like it. I don't like things that are that simplistically set up. The formulaic: we create the villain and waste him. I like Byron Trumbo, I think he's an interesting person. He has the same personality traits as the strongest feminist character in the book, Cordie Stumpf. It's just that he won't be trod upon. Sure, he's a male chauvinist pig-dog, but I think he's a likable one. He is pretty indomitable, you have to give it to him. When everything has turned against him: his ex-wife and his two lovers who've never met are all showing up at the island at the same time, he's got body parts showing up all over his resort, he's trying to sell it to a billionaire, not-too-smart Japanese, he'll putt on the 14th green and find a dismembered hand in the hole and the Japanese are waiting to putt. And he has to keep them cool. But he handles it. He knows what to do.

CD: I believe I heard you say once that your wife had jokingly complained about your research taking you to Romania and Bangkok as opposed to the south of France. Did she appreciate Hawaii a bit more than Vlad's castle?

SIMMONS: Yeah, we were there on pure vacation, and she's the reason the book happened, because we were just in the van from the little airport on the west side of the big island headed for our hotel, the Mauna Kea. And she turned and she said: "This is so beautiful." It was so different from what we'd expected. We'd seen other parts of other islands of Hawaii which are tropical. And that part of the big island is volcanic and just no trees or anything; but it's just beautiful. It's so stark and lovely. She said: "This is so beautiful, you couldn't write a horror novel about this place." The other passenger in the van was Artie Johnson from "Laugh-In," you know, played the Nazi. And at that moment, he pointed out—he'd been there a lot—he pointed and said: "Right over there is where a lava tube collapsed just a few months ago." He said it runs about twenty miles up to the volcano. And when he said that, I turned to Karen and said: "I've got it."

CD: In *Hyperion*, you told each character's story as a self-contained unit. Whereas in *Fires Of Eden*, you told their individual stories in bits and pieces related to what was go-

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ing on at the time on the island. Which do you prefer?

SIMMONS: It really depends upon the tale I'm trying to tell overall. The structure is dictated by the novel. In the case of *Hyperion*, the *Canterbury Tales* approached was difficult, but a lot of fun. And I think it was enjoyable and worked very well. I can't use it again. It's not something you can probably use more than once every ten books. I haven't gotten ten books away from it. The *Fires Of Eden* approach, where you cut back to a written document in the past, is dangerous because if the story you're telling in contemporary days is interesting, the reader doesn't want to go back and read a rather formalist Victorian-style journal. So that had to be at least equal in interest in the narrative strength. To me, that's always a challenge. Plus the parallel tales, growing closer and tighter together in action, create a lot of problems for a writer. In this case, you have the same thing happening 130 years earlier and in contemporary times, so you can't just repeat the story. Plus, you had the characters read the journal, so they know some of these surprises that we want the reader to encounter later in the book of the contemporary tale. So the complexity was fun. Using my gauge of reader response is that, when you change chapters or go back to the old journal entries, there should be a paragraph or so of reluctance, like: "Oh, no, I want to find out what's happening to Cordie here, in 1996." But then, within a paragraph or so, not a page, but a paragraph, you go: "Ah," and relax into the old story. If it doesn't work that way, it's damn dull.

CD: So basically, you're having to juggle two separate stories, for all practical purposes.

SIMMONS: Sure. I mean, it's all part of the same major story, but when the tone is different, the style is different, the characters are different, the reader is being jerked from one tale to another. They know that, and it is uncomfortable.
CD: How'd you put that together? Did you do it basically chapter by chapter, changing gears, or did you do one big chunk of the 1994 and then one big chunk of the 1866?

SIMMONS: No. I couldn't do the latter way, I couldn't do that. I knew in each story roughly what was going to happen, but it's an organic tale, it's interwoven. What happened in contemporary times, whenever the book comes out—the 1995 story—has to hook back in to Mark Twain things. They have to compliment and balance each other, so I couldn't write them separately.

CD: I went back and reread the *Lovedeath* foreword, and in it you mention Samuel Clemens' Sandwich Island dispatches. At that point, January '93, were you al-

ready thinking about the *Fires Of Eden*?

SIMMONS: I was already working on it. The foreword ends up quoting Twain and one of the Sandwich Island things, and I mentioned it simply because I was already well embarked on that other program, which is usually the case. Which is why it's so difficult to go out on tour or discuss the last book, because, as I always like to say, "I've passed a lot of words under the bridge since then."

CD: I want to read you a piece of *Fires Of Eden*. We're in the diary section, June 7, 1866, at Hilo, Hawaii, and Aunt Kidder has asked Clemens why he traded his profession of piloting a steamboat for that of a correspondent. He leans on the railing—

"—lit another of his detestable cigars and said with a bit of glint in his eye, 'I hated to do it, Miss Stewart, join the literary life, I mean. I tried to find honest work, may Providence turn me into a Methodist if I did not. I tried and failed, and succumbed to the temptation of making my living without having to work.'"

Dan Simmons or Sam Clemens?

SIMMONS: It's more accurate of Sam Clemens. I paraphrased different ways of Twain saying the same thing. I put in honest work for eighteen years as a teacher, so I didn't hate to do it at all. I just loved joining the literary life. This is much more preferable to me, though I love teaching. Twain used to precede many of his talks with that sort of thing. (In Simmons' best Twain twang) "I hated to do it, tried to find honest work, but I couldn't so I became a journalist. Haven't worked an honest day since." That's Twain.

CD: In both *Fires Of Eden*, and "The Great Lover," you use a formal language that people would think of as 100 years old, or 150 years old or whatever. Do you enjoy that kind of language? That sort of formal give and take?

SIMMONS: I enjoy it a lot, because I enjoy reading, and it's easy to forget that there were times when styles were so drastically different, unless one reads that era a lot. When you read the personal journals at the turn of the century and up through World War One, it is a completely different style. It's like when Ken Burns' Civil War series was on a couple of years ago, we heard the written diaries and letters of the Civil War. They're sentimental and they're flowery, but they're beautiful, too. And the same is true when I was researching "The Great Lover." There were over a dozen major poets at the Battle of the Somme just on the British side. And most of them were keeping journals and it's strong, powerful stuff. In *Fires Of Eden*, I read the journals of Victorian travel writers, like Miss C.F. Gordon Cummings. She was great, she had an indomitable will. My favorite was Isabella Bird, that's who I based the prose style on. Isabella Bird spent six months in the Sandwich Islands and wrote about it. It's a wonderfully enjoyable book. She's famous out here in Colorado for her *Ladies Life In The Rocky Mountains*. And you can still go find Long's Peak and use it as a trail guide from something she wrote in the 1850's. So I enjoyed Isabella Bird. But her style is so powerful, so filled with detail. For instance, a Victorian writer in those days was a botanic expert, it just went without saying. She knew the name of every flower, plant, and fern on the islands, and wrote it all down in both Latin and its common name. And I couldn't do that. I did a trace of that, to show the reader in *Fires Of Eden* what an early Victorian writer would write like. But if I wrote the whole thing in her style—first of all I'm not capable of it, and secondly, people just couldn't take it today, it's so dense. So thick. So I just gave a small taste of it.

Photo Credit: Doug and Tomi Lewis

CD: The Rocky Mountain book she wrote, that's mentioned in *Fires Of Eden*. Is Eleanor's aunt based on her?

SIMMONS: Yes. Eleanor's aunt, the fictional character of Aunt Kidder, is actually largely an amalgam of different travel writers, but especially Isabella Bird. I think the one book of Isabella Bird's that is read today is *Ladies Life In The Rocky Mountains*. It's a regional book here. It's a marvelous book.

CD: I want to get back to the poetry in "The Great Lover" for a moment. All the poetry you used was written by fighting soldiers and you co-opted it for your fictional character, James Edwin Rooke. Didn't I hear that you had gone back and tracked down the families of the poets and paid them a royalty?

SIMMONS: It's not a big deal, it's just that most of the pieces of poetry I used in "The Great Lover" had lapsed, the copyright had lapsed. We're talking about things written in 1916, and many of the poets had died in 1916 and 1917. There were a few that were still in print, the copyrights had been extended by family members, but most were in public domain. It wasn't enough to know that, so my agent and I hired a rather good researcher in England to work with my British agent to actually check into who still either had the rights or would have the rights, and then we simply got permission to use the poetry and paid them—not a big chunk of royalties but the kind of payment one would make to a publisher if the copyright still existed. And that seemed to me to be basic decency, you know, using their work. Especially in the fictional sense, which I hesitated, for the better part of a year, before using that technique of putting real poetry into the mouth of a fictional poet. But in the end I'm glad I did. It made the poet have a dimension that I could never had created.

CD: I think it was incredibly effective.

SIMMONS: We had a different, but stranger experience a couple of years earlier. In *The Hollow Man,* I use just four lines of T.S. Eliot. We cleared the North American rights for the publisher, but when the British edition was coming out, they literally stopped the presses and sent me one of those faxes you just have to frame and put up somewhere. The whole book is T.S. Eliot, *The Hollow Man.* They might have taken a clue. I'm not suggesting my British publisher is illiterate, but they might have noticed certain resonances, like two-thirds of the images plus the entire structure being from Dante and Eliot. So when they ran across that, they said something like: "These four lines. It's Wordsworth isn't it?" No, it's T.S. Eliot and haven't you cleared the rights? They said: "No, we haven't." So they approached Mrs. Eliot, who's still alive, still owns the rights. And she had not granted use of the excerpt, rather than the entire poetry, in something like twenty-eight years. So I ended up having to send an overnight express letter throwing myself upon the mercy of Mrs. T.S. Eliot. Luckily, I knew quite a bit about her and Eliot. I didn't make any personal references, but I felt I could appeal to her, and she okayed it within five days and the book went ahead. It's just sort of an example. I'm not an academic writer, I'm not a "serious writer," but with things like *The Hollow Man,* there were so many levels. If nothing else, there was quite a game of where is this image from, why is this structured this way. But that was part of the game, and there are hundreds of references to Eliot's work and Dante in *The Hollow Man.* And one assumes, if not the reader, then one's publisher sees and responds to the fact that they're there.

CD: I must say that the end of *The Hollow Man* was one of the most emotionally satisfying endings I've read in your work.

SIMMONS: I'm glad to hear that.

CD: And equally, the opening scene in *Children Of The Night,* struck me the same way, where they go to the orphanage. Probably the most intense five or ten pages I've read in a long time.

SIMMONS: I'm able to write intense pages usually when I've been through an intense experience, like traveling into Romania at the height of the selling the babies. My first novel, of course, was about India: *Song Of Kali,* and that really grabbed the intensity of the ten or eleven weeks I was over there. I'm not a travel writer, but at least I can reach back to reactions that places create in me. So I'm glad it struck you hard, because Romania hit me pretty hard.

CD: You were there just after the Communists fell.

SIMMONS: I was there about a year after. My characters arrived just days after, because it was more interesting then. I don't have the guts to go in four days after, while the bodies are still on the street. Although I did research a story in *Lovedeath,* and just happened to get into Thailand at the time they were shooting civilians. And I was, literally, there as soon as the curfew dropped and people could go out. We saw the blood stains and the bullet holes. They had taken the bodies away, but everything else was still intact there. As I mentioned in my introduction, the odd part is, that's really not what the story's about. It's about the sex trade in Bangkok, and it's about the AIDS epidemic that's now hitting them. But that was background, at least.

CD: Another level of subtext. That also was a nice story, *Dying In Bangkok.* That one appeared in *Playboy,* right?

SIMMONS: Yeah, a slightly shorter version of it. And you're the only person I've ever heard who said it was a nice story. Most people agree with my wife, which is the story is disgusting and unreadable.

CD: Oh, I thought it was wonderful. I think because of how you put it together. Your structure is always very solid.

SIMMONS: Most of my reading is non-fiction and most of my reading in fiction is what they call "serious fiction:" contemporary fiction, magic realists, whatever, and one of the elements of so-called serious contemporary fiction which I think is not happy is . . . like novels. In novels, the endings are miserable, for the most part. Most of the big names in fiction don't know how to end a novel. The structure has it's own interesting aspects to it, but again, it's like painting in miniature often. And books just dribble away, they really do. It's not that you have to have some big surprise ending like "The title 'To Serve Man' is a cookbook." I think structure is a lost form in contemporary writing today. I think genre fiction has essentially reserved that and I think serious fiction is moving back in that direction. I don't think there's any perfect structure. It either works or it doesn't. I'm very sensitive to when the structure of a novel fails, even when they put an honest effort in. In something like *The Hollow Man*, the structure is very, very important, especially, since I say, I was borrowing the structure from T.S. Eliot and Dante. It was a descent into hell. I don't want to put people down in the pit of hell and leave them there. Contemporary fiction would do that. I think it's nice to resolve it in some way, not always a happy ending, but resolve it, that's the important thing, to have some resolution. And it's true, life doesn't just resolve. Whatever happens, it happens, then you get older and you die, that's the only resolution. I don't believe fiction should be like life.

CD: In King's last few books, he seems to have gotten away from supernatural horror, and hasn't suffered lagging sales. You've been genre-hopping since the beginning. Any problems with editors or fans or critics trying to pigeonhole you?

SIMMONS: Yeah, that's their job. That really is their job. They nail down what a writer is. I think they're totally different situations. I think King did it the right way. He created the largest reading audience in the history of planet Earth, and then he's free to do what he wants. When someone has a small-to-moderate audience as I do, that freedom to do what you want isn't quite earned yet. You can do it, but nobody's obligated to publish it, because you don't have the audience waiting for it. So that's created problems for my publishers and I'm aware of it. It's created a rather enjoyable ongoing battle with everybody except my agent, he's been very helpful. He's just suggested I keep writing what I want and he'll find a place for it.

CD: How long does it take—I realize every project is different—from the time you decide to write about this or that, to the time it actually falls out of the word processor relatively ready to go to the publisher?

SIMMONS: In my career, I've set things up so I have less than a year to write each book, and that hasn't been wise. I'm almost finished with that. The way I see it, I only have three more books to create that way, then I'll go out and leisurely spend five years writing the next book. It's hard to say. Some things gestate over a period of years. *Phases Of Gravity* took about five years to write, literally. I'd write a piece of it and put is aside, and then a year later, pick it up. *Fires Of Eden* took about sixteen months, but over six months of that was wasted. I started the book, wrote a large chunk of it, realized that the thing was rather humorless, and I scrapped it. I've never done that before, scrapped something. I just stopped.

CD: Was that hard to do?

SIMMONS: That was very hard to do. You're looking back at those days and weeks and months where you had no weekends and you didn't go on vacation with your family and so forth, and you say, "I can't waste that." You have to realize it's not wasted, you realize you just went down the wrong alley. What I wanted to do, I realized, was create something with a sense of humor to it, and a lightness, on top of some serious topics, and create something with a completely different tone. And you can't go back and add tone. It's not like you can add a joke every five paragraphs.

CD: Who are some of your current favorite novelists? Favorite books, favorite stories?

SIMMONS: I read almost everything and I get aphasic with names. That's inexcusable for a writer. One of the more enjoyable books of recent years is *Mating*. I've forgotten his name again. It's the only book other than *Whites*, a collection of short stories he's put out. I think it's a brilliant book. I love Tom Wolfe, I still love Saul Bellow. I went a few years ago to hear him speak in Florida and I would have walked from Colorado to Florida and Miami to hear him speak. He's hard to read, but I think he'll last a long, long time. I still like Updike even though I've had recently greater troubles reading his books, but I still admire

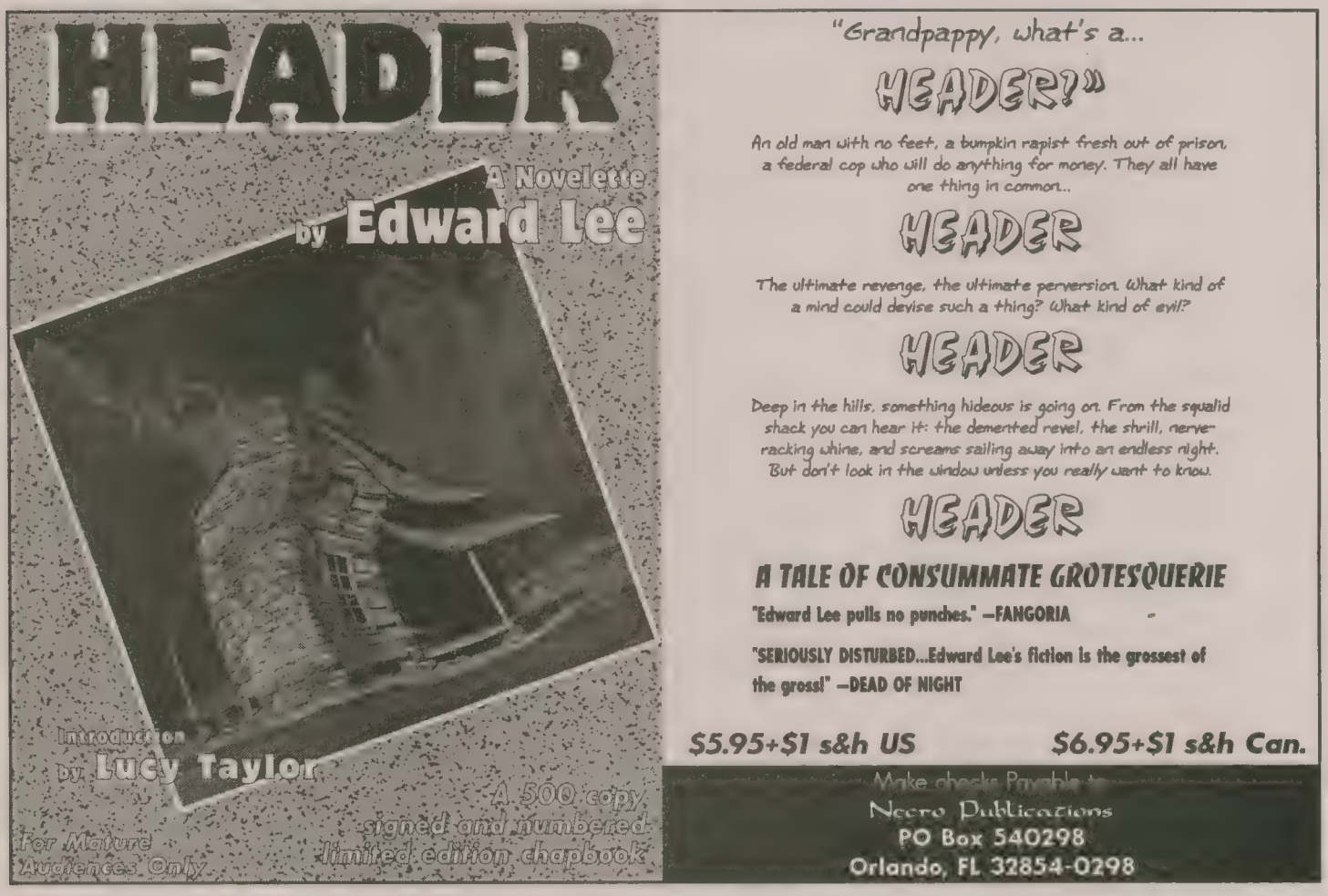
him. There are a lot of contemporary writers.

CD: With *Fires Of Eden*, much of the book read almost like a travel book, with both Twain and Aunt Kidder being travel writers. It was interesting to see the tale from 1866 and the contemporary tale and the travelogue.

SIMMONS: I enjoy books that have a sense of place. And I enjoy books that make me want to go somewhere that I haven't been. And I guess that if I have any ambition for *Fires Of Eden*, it's that people will travel to the big island more. They'll see the volcanos and enjoy, of course, the resorts and so forth. Not just the beauty of the Hawaiian Islands, but the complexity. I love the myth. I love the Hawaiian stories and it was fun weaving those into this tale. I think people would enjoy reading the original Mark Twain letters, his letters from Hawaii, from the Sandwich Islands. I did. They're still valid. All the travel stuff from the 1850s and 1860s gives you insight into modern Hawaii. Have you ever encountered a book called *How To Read Donald Duck*?

CD: No.

SIMMONS: A Marxist friend of mine gave me that years ago. It was written in the early '70s. And it's a Marxist's interpretation of the Walt Disney comics and it's brilliant, absolutely brilliant. It's written by two journalists imprisoned in the soccer stadium down there when they had the right-wing revolution in Chile. Two Chilean journalists. And it shows that all the Donald Duck comics were essentially capitalist propaganda, absolute capitalist, imperialist propaganda. I loved it. I grew up reading Uncle Scrooge and Donald and stuff, and every tale almost—what happens is, this billionaire imperialist sends his hired mercenaries—Donald and his nephews—off to some poor, third world country to steal their only treasure. And usually in stealing the treasure, they help the local powers-that-be put down revolutions. So they keep the status quo there in the country, and then the ducks either do or don't get the treasure and get away with it. And that's more or less what I try to do. I go to these interesting places and steal whatever treasure, whether in terms of mythology from Calcutta or Bangkok or Hawaii. So I sort of relate to Donald Duck.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GARDEN OF EDEN

AL SARRANTONIO

AL SARRANTONIO is the author of one of my all-time favorite werewolf novels, *Moonbane*, as well as many other well-received books including *October* and *Skeletons*. When I first read "Garden of Eden," it gave me a major case of the giggles, and then it gave me the creeps.

"Come on, Chump!" Griffey called.

Griffey was ready and so were the others. Mug and Brudder and Chaz were all out there in the alley, decked out in backward baseball caps and old sweatshirts and dirty jeans and sneakers that used to be white.

Chump, sweatshirt caught halfway over his head, ambled to the window and shouted, "I'll be right down, you fatheads!"

"Fathead yourself, Chump!" Mug shouted up angrily. "Move it, you dope!"

"Yeah!" Brudder shouted, extending his vocabulary with the utterance. "Yeah, move it, you . . . dope!"

"Ahhhhh, Shaddup!" Chump shouted back down at them, sweatshirt now in place as he searched his dresser frantically not for his comb but for his cap, which he finally found in the most unlikely place—on his bedpost, where it belonged.

"Dat muddah of mine," he said, shaking his head even as his mother's voice rose up from the depths of the house below.

"Chauncey, are you up there? I think some boys are here for you, but remember, you're being punished!"

Quickly, Chump turned to the window.

"Cheese it, you guys!"

The gang below scattered.

"Chauncey, do you hear me?"

"Sure I do!" he shouted down.

There was a pause and then his mother said, "All right, just remember you can't come out of there till dinner! It was very careless of you to break Mr. Carlson's window with that baseball!"

"Sure, Mom! Sure! Very careless!" he said, even as he was climbing out the window, taking hold to the rain spout to lower himself to the ground two stories below.

As he reached the lower window he paused, holding his breath.

There inside sat his mother with her bridge friends, playing cards in the immaculately clean living room.

"Chauncey is really such a *good* boy . . . " his mother was saying, in her sweet voice.

Chump shook his head as he slid the rest of the way down into the alley.

"Muddahs," he said.

"Hey Chauncey!" a voice whispered fiercely from behind a nearby garbage bin.

A moment later Griffey stepped out, grinning, followed by the others.

Chump stood tall, marched up to Griffey and took him by the collar.

"I told you not to call me that, you mug," Chump said. "Call me dat again and I'll wipe the alley wit ya."

The color drained from Griffey's face.

"Sorry, Chump," he said.

Chump let him go.

"All right, boys," Chump said, giving a big smile to his gang. "Let's go find dem dead, dancing bodies."

They strutted out into the afternoon like they owned it. With Chump at the lead, the others ranged out behind him, they made a quick left at the corner, passing a close line of perfect, trimmed houses, all the same.

A little kid riding his bike in front of one of the houses looked up as they passed.

"Hey, Chump!" he grinned. "How ya doin'?"

"Just fine, Bertie," Chump grinned.

"Hey!" Bertie said. "Ain't you bein' punished?"

Without breaking stride, shoulders thrown back proudly, Chump nodded.

"Yep."

"Hey, I'm gonna tell!" Bertie said, jumping off his bike to run back toward Chump's house.

"Hey!" Chump shouted, and when he snapped his finger Mug ran after Bertie, catching him in mid-stride and dragging him complaining back to stand in front of Chump.

"You was saying, Bertie?" Chump said.

"Hey! Lemme go! Lemme go, Mug!"

Chump said, "Still gonna rat on me, Bertie?"

Bertie shook his head emphatically.

"'Course not, Chump! I was just kiddin' is all! Lemme go!"

Chump made a motion with his head, and Mug dropped Bertie to the ground.

"Sure I'm gonna tell!" Bertie said, backing away from the gang. "Unless ya takes me with ya!"

Chump looked at Mug, who made a motion to grab Bertie again.

"Go ahead!" Bertie said. "Do what ya want! Beat me up if ya like! But as soon as you leave I'll still rat on ya!"

Defiantly, Bertie clenched his little fists and added, "Unless ya takes me with ya!"

"Know where we're going, Bertie?" Chump said mildly.

"Where?" Bertie said.

"We're going to see the bodies, Bertie," Chump said in a low voice. "The dancing dead bodies."

"We're going to see the bodies, Bertie," Chump said in a low voice. "The dancing dead bodies."

The color dropped out of Bertie's face.

"Still wanna come, Bertie?" Griffey said, smiling.

"Uhhh . . . yeah!" Bertie said, suddenly defiant again. "Yeah, sure I wants to come!"

Chump turned and said, "Then come on, ya punk," and walked on, the others following.

Bertie stayed behind for a few seconds, then, screwing up his courage, quickly wheeled his bike onto his front lawn, dropped it, and ran after.

At the end of the row of houses they made a left, crossed over two more blocks of picture-perfect houses, then crossed the street until they suddenly found themselves at the wooded lot that led to their destination.

On either side of the lot the houses looked as if they had pulled themselves back to either side, avoiding the site. There were high weeds at the borders, as if the owners had hoped to forget the place was even there. At one time a house just like all the other houses in the neighborhood had stood here, but it had burned to the ground, and, when rebuilt, had burned again. Only the weed-choked and blackened foundation remained.

"The haunted lot . . . " Bertie whispered, mouth open.

"You believe that crap?" Griffey said, smiling widely at Bertie.

But the others were silent, too, and nobody had taken a step onto the lot.

"They says the ground's haunted, and the grass, too," Chump said. "They says anybody goes in don't come out."

He waited a moment, then blurted out a laugh.

"I says it's the bunk," Chump said, and without a moment of hesitation he stepped over the curb and onto the lot.

He looked back at the line of unsure faces behind him.

"Well, you mugs? Either youse is with me or you ain't—which is it?"

Bertie turned and ran, yelling out behind him, "See you guys! My mudder wants me to clean my room!"

The others watched him scoot around a corner, gone, then turned to face Chump again.

"Well?" Chump said. "I stepped in, and I'm still alive, ain't I?"

Griffey threw his shoulders back and stepped over the curb to stand next to Chump.

"Anyone don't come is chicken," Griffey said ominously. "Anyone don't follow Chump ain't nothing but the chicken's egg itself."

"It ain't like we's afraid of the lot itself," Chaz said, and Brudder and Mug nodded.

"What is it, then?" Griffey said.

"Well, it's . . . . "

"Spit it out," Chump ordered, suddenly angry.

"It's the story," Mug said.

"Yeah," Chaz continued, "you know, about the dancing bodies."

"What about it?"

"You know, the part about nobody being allowed to go see 'em. About it bein' a rule and all."

"So?" Chump said. "Didn't we take a vote? And wasn't the vote that we'd go and see for ourselves, because it's all the bunk?"

"Yeah, but . . . " Chaz said, looking at his own feet.

"Well?"

"They said Johnny Devo and his boys went to see it, and they never come back."

"That's baloney and you know it!" Chump said. "Everybody knows Johnny and his boys run away and joined the army."

"That ain't what I heard . . . " Chaz mumbled.

"Well, we took a vote, like I said," Chump snapped.

"And I voted against it," Chaz mumbled.

"And I wanted to," Mug said. "Only I was afraid to."

Chump turned, red-faced, to Brudder.

"And what about you?"

Brudder, overwhelmed with the prospect of having to think, merely shrugged.

"Go on, then," Chump said. "Go on and run home to your muddahs, just like Bertie. But remem-

ber this, that when we comes out of that forest, after we see what there is to see, you bums is out of the club for good. Get me?"

The three of them seemed to consider the point for a moment, and then Chaz suddenly turned and bolted away.

"Chicken-crud!" Griffey yelled, and then he and Chump held the other two with their stares.

Chump said, "What about you two? You chicken-cruds, too?"

Mug fought with himself, then, head down, stepped forward, gulping, to stand by Chump and Griffey.

"And you, Brudder?"

Brudder just shrugged again, and, after giving a look behind him, stepped over the curb, too.

"Just what I thought!" Chump said, slapping Brudder on the back. "With us, like always! Buddies to the end!"

Brudder smiled sheepishly.

"Sure," he said.

"I always knew that Chaz was a chicken-crud," Griffey said.

"Yeah," Chump said.

"Me, too," said Mug, but as they marched into the lot, Mug gave a furtive look back the way that Chaz had run, and gulped again.

The sky had turned from bright, high blue to slate gray. The summer afternoon seemed to drain away into the tall weeds, leaving the air thick and sweaty, gray as the sky.

They passed the burned-out foundation, stopping to look in at the puddles of dirty water and scatters of charred timber within.

"Looks like the poifect place for a picnic!" Griffey laughed.

"Hey Brudder!" Chump said, "Why don't you come and live here? Then that old man of yours can't crack you on the head no more, heh?"

Brudder seemed to consider the offer, furrowed his brow, then shook his head.

Chump slapped him on the back again, laughing.

"Just joking, Brudder! I wouldn't want you to miss getting that Friday night beatin'!"

"Sure," Brudder said.

"Come on!" Chump said, swaggering ahead of them, toward the thickening row of trees ahead.

They followed, and now the afternoon turned dark.

As they stepped into the tree line, it was as if someone had thrown a switch. Chump looked up, expecting the sky to be blotted out, but there were generous gaps between the tree tops, showing a blackening, cloud-roiled sky. From somewhere far off a tentative rumble of thunder sounded, a mournful

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drum beating a deaf warning. The sky brightened momentarily, the first jolt of lightning bulbing the black clouds.

Mug swallowed hard before saying, "Maybe we better wait for better weather."

"Baloney," Chump said, leading them ever deeper into the trees.

"But if it rains—"

"—We get wet, " Griffey snapped, though he too had started to study the rumbling clouds, a look of worry clouding his face as another, closer shot of thunder rolled overhead, following a bright burst of lightening that crackled off in the deep woods to their right, sending a wash of ozone across their nostrils.

Chump snapped, "We keep going, and that's it."

"Hey, Chump—" Griffey began, but then they heard another far-off rumble, this one not thunder, which grew and grew to a roar and then dopplered gently away from their ears.

"Hear that?" Chump said. "Know what that is?"

The three blank faces of his companions were briefly lit by new thunder.

Chump laughed. "Don't you bums get it? We're on the right track—*that's the railroad trestle!*"

"A train!" Griffey said, his doubts suddenly drowned.

Above them in the trees there was the sudden sound of fat rain drops hitting leaves. A few drops fell like rifle shot around them.

"Keep moving," Chump ordered, and they moved on deeper into the woods, following the barest of paths, while thunder came again following lightning, and water fell from the low angry clouds, building.

Soon the rain stopped them completely. The forest had become more than trees and leaves and pine needles, but a thing of water, too. It fell in broken sheets around them, splashing high against trunks and boles and washing down in irregular waterfalls. They were soaked in no time, and, in the midst of lightning and the instantaneous booms of thunder, could not make their way forward.

"Stop here!" Chump shouted above the din, and they huddled, wet to the skin, hair plastered to their skulls, against the fragrant sap-ridden thin bark of a tall pine.

Chump pushed the water out of his face, his hand like a windshield wiper.

"Maybe it's a warning!" Griffey said, shivering partly with the coldness of the thunderstorm against his sopping wet clothes, which clung like a second skin.

"Listen, you rat!" Chump said, grabbing Griffey by his wet collar. "I'm tired of your bellyaching! You think I got rocks in my head? You think I don't know you'se wanted to take over as leader for the longest time? You think I ain't seen the way you strut around and act big? The way you orders the boys around when I'm not there? Yeah, Mug told me all about you, Griffey, how you'se been talking behind my back." Chump pulled back his free hand, balling it into a fist.

"I oughtta pop you right here—"

Griffey's face colored itself with fear.

"It ain't that, Chump!" he pleaded. "It ain't that at all! I know you'se the boss and all! It's just that . . . well, maybe we shouldn't be here, is all! Maybe somebody's giving us one last chance, with the rain and all! You know Johnny Devo didn't run away with his gang and join the Army—we all know it! You think a guy like that, wearing a big ruby ring and hat like he wore, the way he wore it on his head jaunty and all, you think he run away? You think a guy like that'd wear an Army uniform? You seen his muddah, how she walks around in black all the time, how she cries in the market and all! She knows it and everybody knows he came in here and didn't come out!"

Chump's face flushed with anger, and now his ready fist wheeled around, striking Griffey flush on the cheek.

Griffey went down, making a splash when he hit the ground, and lay there, holding his face.

"Go on then, you chicken-crud!" Chump shouted, standing over Griffey with both hands tightened to fists. "Go on and run home to your own muddah, if you'se so scared!"

Griffey lay propped on one elbow, a hand to his face where he'd been struck.

Chump prodded him with toe. "Go on, then, you chicken-crud! Get out!"

A wash of emotion passed across Griffey's face. He opened his mouth as if to say something, then pushed himself back away from Chump, scrambled to his feet and ran off, back the way they had come. A bolt of lightning momentarily lit his flight.

"You'll be sorry, Chump!" he shouted back in a retreating voice. "Your own muddah'll be wearing black before you know it!"

"In a pig's eye!" Chump laughed, and then he turned quickly to his two remaining gang members.

"And youse two?" he said. "Are you with me—or are you gonna run with your tails between your butts like Griffey?"

Mug was staring at the spot in the trees where he had last seen Griffey.

"Well?" Chump said, shoving Mug with the flat of his hand and bringing his face up close so the other boy would have to look into his eyes.

"I'm wit ya, Chump," Mug mumbled.

"Uh, sure," Brudder said, nodding.

"Real men," Chump said proudly, punching them both lightly on the arm.

"Sure," Brudder said again.

As quickly as it had come, the storm retreated. The pounding sheeted rain reduced to a trickle, then stopped altogether, leaving a false shower in the woods of water falling from high leaves. Thunder and lightning were separated by time again, and pulled away overhead into the back distance. The black clouds softened to muggy gray and then, in widening holes, showed the former blue of the summer day through in bright, eye-hurting patches.

The other rumble they had heard before returned, closer now, before roaring off away.

"Another train!" Chump said.

They left their shelter and pushed their way through wet leaves, water-lined branches, which dropped new showers on them as they passed.

Then a line of something cutting from left to right, a high, man-made thing, became visible through a thin cut in the woods ahead of them.

Chump pushed ahead, put his head down to force his way through a wall of pine branches, Brudder and Mug behind him.

The wall gave way, and the three stood suddenly, startlingly, out in the open.

"Jeez!" said Mug.

"Uh . . . wow," said Brudder.

And there it was.

They were now in a wide open cut in the woods, neatly trimmed from where they stood to a spot about a half football field away. The grass at their feet was neatly trimmed, sloping gently down to a shallow gravel-filled slope that led to a creek. As they watched, water was draining into the river, which chuckled with new vitality.

Straddling the water, spread as far as the eye could see from right to left, were the high, strong, inverted v's of a railroad trestle, holding a double line of track some thirty feet over the water.

And there, hanging from the span between the two trestles in front of them, were hung three rotting corpses.

"Jeez!" said Mug again.

The hair on the back of Chump's head rose as if alive. Brudder stood beside him, mouth open, dull eyes fixed on the hanging things which dangled straight and unmoving in front of them, neatly spaced, dead.

"They ain't dancin'," Brudder said dully, the most words he had ever strung together.

"No, they ain't," Chump said somberly.

He recognized the bodies, the clothes; he recognized the ruby ring on a finger of the half bone, half flesh hand of Johnny Devo, and the cap with pins on it that stood at a jaunty angle on Johnny's skull, stuck to bits of peeled skin.

"They ain't . . . dancin'," Brudder said again, and then once again they heard the far off rumble of not-thunder.

"A train!" Mug said.

And there to the distant left was a dot pushing smoke at the horizon. Then it was barreling toward them, looking like black lightning, sounding like thunder that would never end. The distant trestles trembled with the mighty iron weight overhead, a shower of latent rain dropping from beneath the tracks following the engine's path.

The bodies on their ropes twitched and began to swing. And now the train roared by, punching clouds of steam at the sky, screaming iron wheels against iron tracks, the black engine and tender tearing past like a slow rocket with a line of sooted, dull-colored gondolas and hoppers filled with coal, box cars shut tight with their secrets. The trestles shook and rattled with the terrific pressure, a spray of water washed down, and the ropes were yanked like marionette strings, as the dead boys hanging from them danced like puppets, arms flapping, legs kicking like Rockettes, feet tapping at naked air.

"*Now* they's dancing," Brudder said, mouth still open, unintelligent eyes filled with inert satisfaction.

The train flew past and onward, it's dull red caboose rattling behind, taking the roar with it. The boys on the ropes settled to a gentle swing. The gash-mouth in Johnny Devo's skull regarded Chump with secret satisfaction, as the head shook mildly back and forth before settling to rest once more.

"I've had enough of this crud, I'm gettin' outta here," Mug said, and turned to run, stopping dead in his tracks as the color drained from his face.

"Hey, Chump . . . " he gulped, as Chump and then Brudder turned to look.

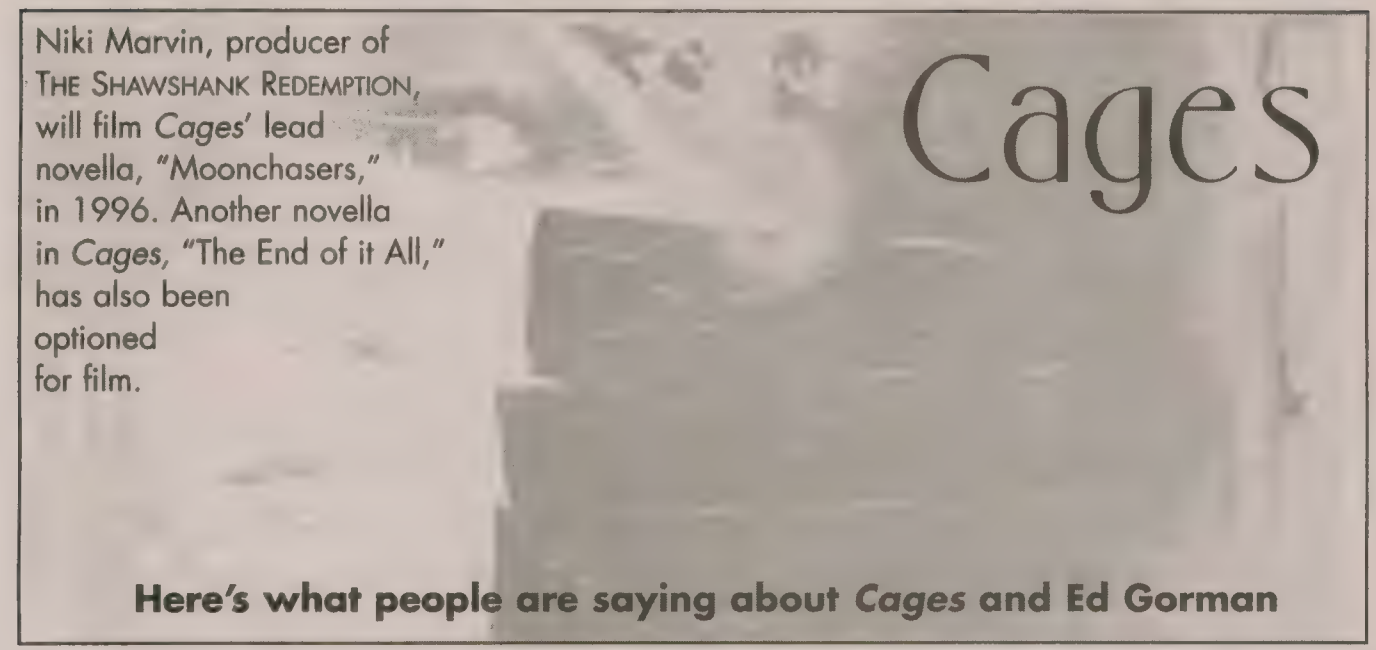
The tree line was no longer lined with just trees. At the border of the woods, where the neatly trimmed grass began, stood a line of people stretching as far to either side as the train trestles. They were hooded to their waists, and the three closest to Chump and his gang each held a coil of strong new rope.

Others, appearing overhead on the trestle, were already cutting down Johnny Devo and his boys, brushing the remnants of the old rope knots away as the bodies fell thumping to the ground.

And Chump, even as the world dropped away, heard his nearest executioner say in a sweet, sad, sighing voice, "And I thought he was such a *good* boy."

— CD

A new Ed Gorman collection



Niki Marvin, producer of THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION, will film *Cages*' lead novella, "Moonchasers," in 1996. Another novella in *Cages*, "The End of it All," has also been optioned for film.

Here's what people are saying about *Cages* and Ed Gorman

"'Moonchasers' is a little gem, a masterpiece, tight and controlled, a pure pleasure to read."
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"'Moonchasers' is something extra special from Ed Gorman." – KIRKUS REVIEWS

"*Cages* is a powerful, disturbing, often poetic and consistently superior collection filled with writing that is a model of clarity and tight narrative control. *Cages* should be required reading for anyone who wants to experience the art of short story fiction as practiced by a master craftsman." – *MYSTERY NEWS*

"'The End of it All' drags the reader through a rip-roaring tale of teenage lust turned into over-the-top desperation for happiness, effectively keeping the sex and gore on the sidelines. No wonder it has already been optioned for a feature film."
– *FANGORIA*

"This extraordinary collection proves that Gorman is the rightful successor to John D. MacDonald... 'The End of it All' is the most remarkable crime novella since the heyday of James M. Cain."
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"These are strong, strong stories, and Gorman is in charge of every nuance." – PETER STRAUB

"Gorman has the same ability to re-create a now vanished time as Stephen King in 'The Body' and Dan Simmons in *Summer of Night*...[*Cages* acts] as an introduction to Gorman's work or as a fix for established readers." – *LOCUS*

"Nobody writing today has [Gorman's] range, economy, ear for dialogue and strange skills for taking the reader into his confidence to whisper his curious tales." – *ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS*

"Few great short story writers have emerged in the last twenty years, but Gorman has persevered with the form, and is, I suspect, about to get his reward: for a whole new generation of rising writers, Gorman is the Professor of short fiction, and *Cages* will be a crucial text for the most successful of them." – *BEYOND*

"Gorman has set his own very high standard for the [dark suspense] genre." – FEAR

"[Ed Gorman's work] reminds the reader of what Quentin Tarrentino has lately achieved on film."
– INTERZONE

Cages contains 21 stories (5 original), comprising over 150,000 words (50,000+ original).
Cages is limited to 500 copies, signed by Ed Gorman and F. Paul Wilson, and is priced at $35.
Shipping is free if you mention that you saw this ad in *Cemetery Dance*. The book is now available.
Order from: Deadline Press; P.O. Box 2808; Apache Junction, AZ 85217

Much as I'm aware of how you structure your entire *Cemetery Dance* experience around the reading of this column, and much as I appreciate the hours spent savoring my every critical zinger or literary *bon mot*, I'm afraid I've some bad news this time out—

It's a short installment.

Short by *Rough Cuts* standards, anyway. A sad situation dictated by the reality that, for the first time in over three years, I'm *finally* working on another motion picture.

Since June of '94, in fact. Title of this film will either be *Night Skies* or *Watch the Skies*, depending on the distributor's whim. It's a well-written, character-driven, conspiracy/SF/action-adventure/UFO movie (how's that for transgeneric?). The director of this interesting little picture is Harry Bromley-Davenport, he of 1982's memorably bizarre *Xtro*.

Harry's been terrific to work with — a more generous, tolerant collaborator could not be found. See, officially I'm only the Digital/Optical Effects Supervisor on this picture. Which meant spending two months in Houston helming the over forty computer generated F/X shots that appear in the film (didn't know I did CGI work? Check out the end credits of *RoboCop II* — I was the Computer Graphics Supervisor on that one too). Yet during *Night Skies'* principal photography, I also did a smidgen of second unit direction, was the official Still Photographer/Unit Publicist, and acted in two different bit parts! So my greasy little fingerprints are all over this picture. An opportunity for which I say, "Thanks, Harry — Nobody Gets Out of Here Alive!" (film crew in-joke).

A more informative article on *Night Skies/Watch the Skies/*whatever appeared in *Fangoria* earlier this year. Look for it. Also keep your orbs open for my *Splatterpunks 2: Over the Edge*, appearing from Tor in 1995. Finally, thought you'd like to know that I'm now polishing off the final draft of *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner*, which will be available from Harper-Collins in late '95.

So see what I mean? There's so little time for *Rough Cuts* . . . .

VIDEO REVIEWS

Ratings & Symbols Guide

Where applicable, all videos and discs are rated on the four-star system. Four stars are swell, one star is swill (★ - ★★★★).

A sample review, showing an explanation for key symbols found on each heading, follows:

Title (Year of release — Country of release) *Rating Color/BW Subtitled/Dubbed Genre Print Quality (PQ): Poor/Fair/Good Laserdisc Releasing Company* D: (Director) W: (With)

SINISTER CINEMA

The following tapes are available from:

Sinister Cinema
P.O. Box 4369
Medford OR 97501-0168
(503) 773-6860

The Black Torment (1964 — England) ★★ *Color Mystery/Horror PQ: Good* D: Robert Hartford-Davis. W: Heather Sears, John Turner, Ann Lynn, Peter Arne, Norman Bird, Francis De Wolff, Patrick Troughton.

Minor Gothic chiller has British nobleman Turner encountering rape, murder, and hauntings when he returns to his ancestral home with new bride Sears, four years after the tragic suicide of his first wife.

This well-produced mystery is entertaining enough, and it sports a slew of cherished English character actors (including future Dr. Who Patrick Troughton). It also suffers from overfamiliar plotting and a bland leading lady. Never dull, but one wonders what Italian masters Freda or Bava, who were making similar films during the same time period, could have done with this.

Directed by Robert Hartford-Davis, a man who holds the dubious distinction of guiding Peter Cushing's sleaziest role (1967's *Corruption).* Comes packaged with two (black & white) trailers, *Face of Terror* and *Frankenstein's Daughter;* excellent print quality.

Mania (aka *The Flesh and the Fiends*) (1959 — England) ★★★ *Black & White Drama/Horror PQ: Fair* D: John Gilling. W: Peter Cushing, Donald Pleasance, George Rose, Billy Whitelaw.

British director John Gilling routinely receives good ink for the helming of his (overpraised) Hammer horror films *Plague of the Zombies* and *The Reptile.* Yet this brutal, grittily atmospheric period piece is easily Gilling's best picture.

Storyline recounts the oft-told tale of ruthless Scottish surgeon Dr. Knox (a memorable Peter Cushing, with a scarred left eye), and his sordid involvement with those infamous 19th century bodysnatchers, Burke & Hare (Pleasance & Rose). The main emphasis this time around, though, is on ambience and character. Ergo, the surroundings are suitably seedy, and Donald Pleasance (who died the day I'm writing this — Feb. 2, 1995 — at age 75, of heart failure), delivers a surprisingly straightforward performance. Top acting honors go to Billie Whitelaw as a conflicted, exuberant, and ultimately doomed prostitute; quite simply, she's unforgettable.

All in all, a nasty, disturbing minor classic. Definitely holds its own against the much better known Robert Wise/Boris Karloff version of this story, 1945's *The Body Snatcher.* Footnote: Sinister's print runs 92 minutes. What does this mean in relation to the fact that the original U.S. release of this picture (called *Mania)* clocked in at only 87 minutes, while the longer, English version (titled *The Flesh and the Fiends)* ran for 97?

Pattern for Plunder (1962 — England) ★★ 1/2 *Black & White Adventure PQ: Good* D: John Ainsworth. W: Keenan Wynn, Mai Zetterling, Ronald Howard, Rona Anderson, Trader Faulkner.

Engaging British thriller (with mystery/horror overtones) plays like a dry run for the later "Mission Impossible" series, as a crackerjack team of ex-World War II commandos is led by a tough commander (Wynn) to help the English government recover lost Nazi loot.

This pleasing timepasser features an exciting climax occurring off the French islet of Mont-St-Michel. The home of a marvelous Gothic monastery, Mont-St-Michel was once notable for a peculiarity of its surrounding flood plains; a fifty-foot wall of water used to rush across those plains and drown anyone foolish enough to attempt a crossing during high tide. Alas, this spectacular natural occurrence is now only a memory — since the filming of *Pattern for Plunder,* Mont-St-Michel's flood plain has silted in.

In any event, *Plunder* is nicely shot, scored, and directed, with a uniformly good cast generating an unusual amount of warmth and team spirit. How refreshing to come across an action-movie squad that actually *likes* one another!

★★ *Rough Cuts* also recommends these other *Sinister* titles: *The White Spider, The Terrible People, The Embalmer, Halfway House, Love From a Stranger.*

SOMETHING WEIRD

The following tapes can be ordered from:

Something Weird Video
P.O. Box 33664
Seattle WA 98133
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Prince of Space (original Japanese title — *Usei Oji*, or *Planet Prince*) (1959 — Japan. Released in USA 1962) ★★★ *black & White Science Fiction PQ: Fair* D: Eijiro Wakabayashi. W: Tatsuo Umemiya, Joji Oda, Hiroko MIne, Takashi Kanda.

Last issue I bitched about how tedious exercises in *ennui* like *Invasion of the Neptune Men* couldn't hold a candle to such truly awesome moments of Japanese foolishness as *Prince of Space*. So this time, I've gone back to the source.

Prince of Space isn't as well known as, say, *Plan 9 From Outer Space*. But it ought to be — this is a dizzying, mind-boggling, genuinely hilarious camp classic. Cobbled together into feature length from a cheap, late 1950's Toei serial, before then being unleashed upon an unsuspecting American public *via* mid-Sixties television (Why? Revenge for Hiroshima?), this gloriously inept Asian import nominally deals with yet another clutch of evil aliens out to conquer Earth. Their diabolic scheme, however, is of course stymied by a cape-clad superhero . . . plus his loyal band of Japanese schoolboy sidekicks.

But forget the vapid plot; this is the closest you'll get to dropping acid without really ingesting LSD. *See* the most ludicrous band of extraterrestrials ever committed to celluloid (aliens with drooping pointed noses, silent-movie mustaches, and TV antennas on their heads)! *Witness* the same rock-bottom special effects sequences endlessly recycled, over and over again (one shot alone is repeated *three times)! Marvel* at the most laughably inane, jaw-dropping dialogue ever recorded ("What a powerful beam he must have — look at that modulation!")!

Anyway, you get the picture. While there are tons of Golden Turkey wannabes out there, most pseudo-cult "classics" are really just bad movies. Not *Prince of Space*. Trust me — this is the real thing. There's no better way to more enjoyably burn out a few grey cells than with *this* demented delight.

Love Camp 7 (1968 — USA) ★★ 1/2 *Color War/Nudie/Roughie PQ: Good* D: R.L. Frost. W: Bob Cresse, Maria Lease, Dave Freidman, Patricia Roddy, Jo Ellen, Kathy Williams.

Legendary softcore roughie (this picture was already notorious when I first saw it at San Diego's Pussycat Theater in 1968!) has two undercover WACS attempting to rescue a scientist by infiltrating a German concentration camp, an infamous hellhole where Jewish women are forced to prostitute themselves in order to satisfy cruel Nazi lusts.

Now, absolute sexual control is definitely a potent male fantasy, and wryly self-parodying "Women in Chains" flicks like *Caged Heat* can be a lot of fun. But actor/producer Bob Cresse here so excessively amps his fascination with Third Reich degradation (not to mention his notions of woman as plaything) that this picture actually becomes revolting. Not in the sense that the *Ilsa* movies, with their emphasis on mutilation, repulse. No, *Love Camp 7* is that rare case where a picture's overall *tone* is questionable. And rightly so. The fact that it's also so well made makes this truly perverse picture even tougher to take.

Then again, exploitation king Dave Friedman does show up as a cigar-smoking German officer, and gleefully cops a handful. *Love Camp 7* turns into a bit of a gore movie, too, with Gestapo goons getting corkscrewed in the throat. And the flamboyant camp commander is a real hoot.

Yet I keep remembering Freidman's comments concerning Bob Cresse in *ReSearch #10: Incredibly Strange Films:* "Cresse really wants to be a Nazi more than anything else in the world," King Dave said. "He *really* believed he was a Nazi."

Bottom line? *Love Camp 7* is sick, degrading . . . and fascinating. It's also some kind of classic. I guess.

The Worst of Twisted Sex (1960's — USA) ★★★★ *B&W/Color Nudie Trailer Compilation PQ: Good* D: Various. W: Various.

Something Weird Video has a whole line of *Twisted Sex* videos, most of them dealing with (softcore) taboos like S&M, fetishes, gang bangs, dismemberment and other assorted diversions. This is a "Best Of" compilation, a frequently funny series of forty-three risible trailers packed with ludicrous voiceovers (i.e., "Innocent-looking health apparatus used for shocking and indecent purposes!").

The best of this bunch? "It's A Sick, Sick, Sick World," "All Women Are Bad!", and "The Beautiful, The Bloody and The Bare." Included are a few trailers for the proto-gore "Olga" films, an intriguingly professional-looking effort that may be the world's first "nudie *noir*" ("The Pick-Up"), and two of Michael/Roberta Findley's notorious "Flesh" films ("Curse of Her Flesh"/"Touch of Her Flesh"). Also included are sneak previews for well-received *Something Weird* sexploitationers like "She Came on the Bus" and "Psychopathis Sexualis." Not to mention "Ravaged," which tastelessly includes real Nazi atrocity footage with its assorted T&A shots (can you imagine the raincoat brigade jacking off to *that* one?).

A great party tape, despite the Gestapo shit. Incidentally, Seventies mainstream character actor Richard B. Schull (*Slither,* others) pops up here in the trailer for "Watch the Birdie," as a nutcase

strangler who drowns women in toilets.

Bet that's not on his resume.

★★ *Rough Cuts* also recommends these other *Something Weird* titles: *The Electric Chair, The Girl and the Geek, Mona, or The Virgin Nymph (Bucky Beaver Series #50), The Nude Vampire, She-Devils on Wheels,* and *Viva Santo! And Pals.*

VIDEO SEARCH OF MIAMI

The following tapes can be ordered from:

Video Search of Miami
P.O. Box 16-1971
Miami FL 33116
(305) 598-5265

Chara: Kiss (1992 — Japan) ★★ 1/2 *Color Concert Film PQ: Good Letterbox Subtitled (Stereo)* W: Chara.

Full-stereo, nicely shot concert tape highlighting a Japanese pop superstar with plenty of sex appeal (at one point, Chara unzips her full-length black leather coat to reveal a navel-length miniskirt as the camera smash-zooms to her crotch).

But how's the *music*? A bit too bland and frothy for my tastes, I'm afraid — soft rock all the way. Still, the tape is excellently subtitled, and the lyrics reveal a singer obsessed with sensuality and abandonment ("My lips betrayed me . . . "). I was also amused by the coyly confessional interviews that are intercut with Chara's performance footage. Like this sample: "When I first started, I was worried whether people would *like* me."

That must explain the miniskirt.

Keko Mask (1993 — Japan) ★★ 1/2 *Color Fantasy/S&M/Superhero PQ: Fair Letterbox Subtitled (Stereo)* D: Tomo Akiyama. W: Kaju Kujuku, Risa Kondou.

What the *hell* is in all that sushi the Japanese are eating?

Bizarre by even Asian Trash Cinema standards, *Keo Mask* charts the exploits of the world's first nude superheroine (well, she does wear a red mask and cape. Most of the time). Keko's mission? To rescue the tormented, systematically tortured students of a school staffed by sadists. Her method? Flashing her naked vagina and snapping the villains' necks while they're ogling her privates!

Keko is an oddity unto itself; not quite a softcore S&M film, not quite a live-action *manga*, and stylistically influenced by samurai/spaghetti western films. It seems to have been intended as a parody. For example, in a satiric jab at Japan's well-known fetish for authority, just about everyone in this schoolful of sadists is cheerfully bullying somebody socially lower than themselves. The film's also littered with tongue-in-cheek dialogue ("Screaming girls and Wagner go well together!"), and there's an ironic in-joke regarding Japan's habit of optically obscuring genitals ("Oh no! No fogging!" gulps a shaken male student, as he's forced to face pudendum).

Of course, satire is what closes Saturday night. And the film unfortunately reflects the Japanese patriarchy's rigid contempt for women. So the real question is — is *Keko* a good movie?

Nah.

Is it silly, non-PC fun?

You bet.

Which just goes to prove how flexible we at *Rough Cuts* have always been regarding our parameters of cinematic excellence.

Killing Birds (aka *Raptorsm)* (1988 — Italy) ★★★★ *Color Horror/Gore PQ: Good Letterbox Stereo* D: Claudio Lattanzi ("Claude Milliken") W: Robert Vaughn, Lara Wendel, Timothy W. Watt, Leslie Cummins, James Villamaire, Sal Maggiore Jr.

Dreamlike Eurotrash begins as Vietnam Vet (with a prominent "Airborne" shoulder patch) returns home to slaughter his unfaithful wife and her lover at an isolated house filled with caged eagles, one of which rips out the Vet's eyes. Twenty years later, a group of ornithology students stumbles upon the same, now-decayed house . . . only to find it infested with zombies, premonitions, and murderous birds of prey.

This slick n' gory Italian import shamelessly pilfers from better-known works by Bava, Argento, and Fulci — yet *Birds* is surprisingly effective in its own right. What's immediately apparent is the film's handsome cinematography and imaginative direction; where *Killing Birds* really shines, however, is in its subtle approach to narrative and atmosphere.

Told in an oblique, intelligent style (where most plot points are conveyed visually), *Birds* is enhanced by an escalating, confidently handled, eventually overwhelming sense of dread. There's also a knockout moment of surrealism as a main female character (and the audience!) unknowingly slips over the boundaries of reality into a nightmarish precognition sequence, only to discover that this "omen" never happens!

While *Killing Birds* may be nothing more than a contemporary Italo spin on the old haunted house chestnut, it's a damn *tasty* chestnut. Pure mood. Hypnotic rhythms. Nasty violence. Even Mr. Napoleon Solo (Robert Vaughn), stumbling around as a blind guy wearing RayBans. Hey — it worked for me!

Shot in Louisiana; *VSoM's* crisp (letterboxed) print was taken from a Japanese laserdisc and boasts excellent stereo separation.

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Trash videos, *Video Search of Miami* has recently added a number of new items and services you should be aware of.

Top o' this list is *VSoM's* brand-new offering of selected Hong Kong prerecords. That's right; no dubs, but the original tapes in their original boxes! In association with Tai Seng Marketing and World Video Export, *VSoM's* inventory now includes *authorized* HK classics like *A Better Tomorrow 1 & 2, Black Cat, Bride With White Hair* and *Full Contact.* Most are $39.95. Write for a catalog.

VSoM is also offering a German import CD titled *Films of Jean Rollin.* This one has themes from Rollins' *Frissons Des Vampires (Thrill of the Vampires)* and others, conducted by Phillipe D' Amarm. Price is $22.00.

Finally, check out *VSoM's* own Thomas Weisser's first novel, *Violets of Dawn.* This gruesome, signed-by-the-author, limited edition "terror novel" features an intro by Herschell Gordon Lewis — book costs $17.95.

★★ *Rough Cuts* also recommends these other *VSoM* titles: *Adrenaline, Cota de Caza, House on the Outskirts, Spiral, Death Powder, Death Laid an Egg, Evil Dead Trap #1, #2, and #3.*

LASERDISCS

The Criterion Collection

The following laserdiscs are products of *The Voyager Company/The Criterion Collection.* Look for them at all good laserdisc outlets.

The Brothers Quay: Volumes 1 & 2
★★★ 1/2 *B&W/Color Art/Horror PQ: Excellent* D: Stephen & Timothy Quay. W: Puppets, dolls, butterflies, and meat. Contents of *Volume One:* "Street of Crocodiles" (1986), "The Cabinet of Jan Svankmajer, Prague's Alchemist of Film" (1984). Contents of *Volume Two:* "Epic of Gilgamesh" (1985), "Rehearsals for Extinct Anatomies" (1988), "Nocturna Artificialia" (1979).

If Lewis Carroll had been a modern, chronic-depressive filmmaker given to schizophrenic fits, this is the work he'd turn out. Eerie, moldering, and very, very smart, the bizarre, animated-puppet films of The Brother Quay (identical twins) are famed for their dank and hermetic otherworldliness. Criterion's two-volume set packages most (but not all) of The Brothers' creepy, idiosyncratic output. Volume 1 includes the longish "Street of Crocodiles," while Volume 2 has the brutal "Epic of Gilgamesh." Either disc showcases stop-motion animation at its most surreal. And personal. And frightening.

Halloween (1978 — USA) ★★ 1/2 *Color Horror PQ: Excellent Letterbox Supplements CAV* D: John Carpenter. W: Jamie Lee Curtis, Donald Pleasence, Nancy Loomis, P.J. Soles.

Excellent letterboxed version of John Carpenter's seminal (though — dare I say it? — overrated) slasher film. The digital widescreen transfer restores much of the film's dynamic yet beautifully balanced compositions — an abundance of supplemental material includes audio commentary by Carpenter himself, as well as the original theatrical trailer, additional footage shot for the 1980 television release (sequences which directly tie into *Halloween 2),* and a genre film guide by John McCarty, author of *Splatter Movies.* There's also some critical huffing and puffing by Siskel and Ebert taken from an old *Sneak Previews* episode, if you care.

The Silence of the Lambs (1990 – USA) ★★★★ 1/2 *Color Horror PQ: Excellent Letterbox Supplements CAV/CLV* D: Jonathan Demme. W: Jodie Foster, Anthony Hopkins, Scott Glenn, Ted Levine.

The only horror film to win five Oscars is given the deluxe Criterion treatment in a handsomely produced, CAV/CLV package, one whose thoroughness matches the narrative intensity of the film itself. *Lambs* concerns a rookie FBI agent (Foster) tracking down a flesh-skinning serial killer with the aid of a cannibalistic psychiatrist (and the mainstream refuses to call this a horror movie!); this special edition includes a superb letterboxed transfer and numerous supplements (storyboards, production stills, and genuine FBI files on "Mixed Sexual Homicide" – !).

One of the best produced, most thoughtfully annotated discs in the entire Criterion Collection. Which is really saying something.

★★ *Rough Cuts* also recommends these other *Criterion* titles: *Peeping Tom, Salo, Hard-Boiled, The Killer, Akira.*

News from *Elite:* Although I haven't yet had the opportunity to screen one of their offerings, *Elite Entertainment* recently began issuing what looks to be among the most exciting laserdisc releases of the year. Topping this list is a deluxe *Night of the Living Dead* set, featuring supplementary material and a print that's supposed to be the best ever seen. *Elite* has also just released a laserdisc of *Horror Hotel;* future plans include the issuing of a THX-approved *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* disc and a double-disc set of Bava's *Baron Blood/Lisa and the Devil!*

Obviously, this is something to crow about. And to keep an eye on. I'll update you on these discs and others from *Elite* next issue.

ANIME ACTION

The following Japanese animation videotape is available from *Streamline Pictures:*

Lily C.A.T. (1987 – Japan) ★★★ *Color Anime/SF/Horror PQ: Excellent* D: Hisayuki Toriumi.

Seemingly overshadowed by the high-profile release of other, more kinetic *Streamline* titles like *Fist of the North Star* and *Wicked City,* this well-paced SF horror *anime* is also worth searching out. Story concerns a crew of thirteen human explorers put into hibernation during a twenty year journey to a newly discovered planet. Upon awakening, they discover a murderous stowaway, one of which has mysterious connections to the ship's pet cat.

Obviously taking its cues from *Alien, Lily C.A.T.* nevertheless recycles its source material in responsible, well-executed ways. A nice sense of mystery pervades the narrative, there's more characterization than usual, and the homicides are inventively bizarre. All in all, better than you'd think.

★★ *Rough Cuts* also recommends these other *Streamline* titles: *Doomed Megalopolis, Robot Carnival, Wicked City,* and *Crying Freeman.*

B-MOVIE BOOKSHELF

McFarland & Company

The following three books can be ordered directly from the publisher by writing:

McFarland & Company, Inc.
P.O. Box 611
Jefferson NC 28640
(910) 246-4660

Attack of the Monster Movie Makers: Interviews With 20 Genre Giants, by Tom Weaver. McFarland & Company Inc. 384 pages. 1994 ($35.00).

Companion volume to Weaver's two similar McFarland tomes (*Science Fiction Stars and Horror Heros, Interviews With B Science Fiction and Horror Movie Makers)* continues the informal-yet-informative tone of those previous efforts. Weaver reminisces with the likes of producer Herman Cohen (*I Was A Teenage Werewolf),* director Val Guest (*Quartermass 2),* and actors Cameron Mitchell (*Blood & Black Lace),* Ann Robinson (*War of the Worlds),* and Kenneth Tobey (*The Thing),* about their involvement with these iconic films.

My favorite conversation was the one with actress Rose Hobart (born 1906!), who appeared in Mamoulian's 1932 *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.* Wait'll you read how this outspoken woman once stopped Basil Rathbone from bragging about his sexual conquests!

Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing and Horror Cinema: A Filmography of Their 22 Collaborations by Mark A. Miller. McFarland & Company Inc. 437 pages. 1994 ($45.00).

Filmfax contributor Mark Miller examines all of the films co-starring genre legends Cushing and Lee, a period that spanned thirty-five years, began with 1948's *Hamlet* and '52's *Moulin Rouge,* and ended with 1983's *House of Long Shadows.* Along the way, such classics as *Curse of Frankenstein, Horror of Dracula* and *Dr. Terror's House of Horrors* are also researched. Includes interviews, plot synopses, a comprehensive filmography, detailed biographical information on both men, comments from the likes of Patrick Macnee and Hazel Court, and *three* different forewords (by Robert Bloch, Peter Cushing, and Christopher Lee). If that's not enough, this indispensable volume also corrects some inaccurate information previously

connected with the Lee/Cushing vehicles. For instance, Miller states that the model train seen in *Horror Express* (directed by Eugenio Martin) was *not* a miniature originally built for *Nicholas and Alexandria* (as many writers, this one included, have erroneously reported), but one of *two* model trains made for 1972's *Pancho Villa*, a Spanish western also directed by Martin.

Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing is a commendable, must-have job, particularly in light of Cushing's recent death. Hits the bullseye dead on: the definitive analysis of its subject.

Drive-In Theaters: A History from Their Inception in 1933, by Kerry Segrave. McFarland & Company Inc. 286 pages. 1992 ($32.50).

While working on the *Night Skies* digital effects in Texas, I somehow got into a discussion about drive-ins with a young dancer at a local "Gentleman's Club" (don't ask). And at one point, she wistfully confessed that she'd never been to a drive-in, because all the ones in the Houston area had been torn down.

I'm shocked and saddened that there may be an entire generation of you out there sharing this young woman's loss. Best pick up a copy of Kerry Segrave's *Drive-In Theaters* to see what you missed.

Drive-In Theaters is, like *Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing*, the last, best word on its subject. Covering the history of the drive-in from its origins in the thirties (the site and opening date of the world's first drive-in? Camden, New Jersey; June 6, 1933), this exhaustive yet entertaining work's first twenty chapters details such topics as "The Golden Years, 1950's", "Strange Drive-Ins" and "Sex in the Drive-Ins" (my favorite section; I could write my own book on this one!). It then features numerous appendices, including a reproduction of the original drive-in patent filed by Richard Hollingshead, the father of the ozoner, before winding up with a bibliography and index.

Scholarly but never dry, *Drive-In Theaters* is an absolutely essential reference work. You still should find a real drive-in, though. Even if you have to motor to another state to do so.

★★ *Rough Cuts* also recommends these other McFarland titles: *Italian Film: A Who's Who* by John Stewart, *Fantastic Cinema Subject Guide* by Bryan Senn & John Johnson, and *Popeye*, by Fred Grandinetti.

RECOMMENDED MAGAZINES

Samhain (Attn: John Gullidge)
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Billed as "Britain's Longest Running Horror Magazine," *Samhain* is an informative, well-written splatterzine along the lines of (the late, lamented) *Deep Red*. Featuring slick paper and an unusually narrow format, *Samhain* concentrates on the British/Euro scene, with reviews, articles and, interviews *re* the latest book-and-film releases. Recent efforts included an admirably tough-minded, outspoken series of attacks on Britain's outrageous new censorship laws; there's lots of gossip and news items, too. I also like the way *Samhain* regularly stages contests for its readership, with various videos offered as giveaways.

Hey Chizmar! Why don't we give stuff away in *this* 'zine?

It's a wrap.

Hope you enjoyed this session. Maybe next time I'll have caught my breath, and we can finally get to *The Arousers* (1970).

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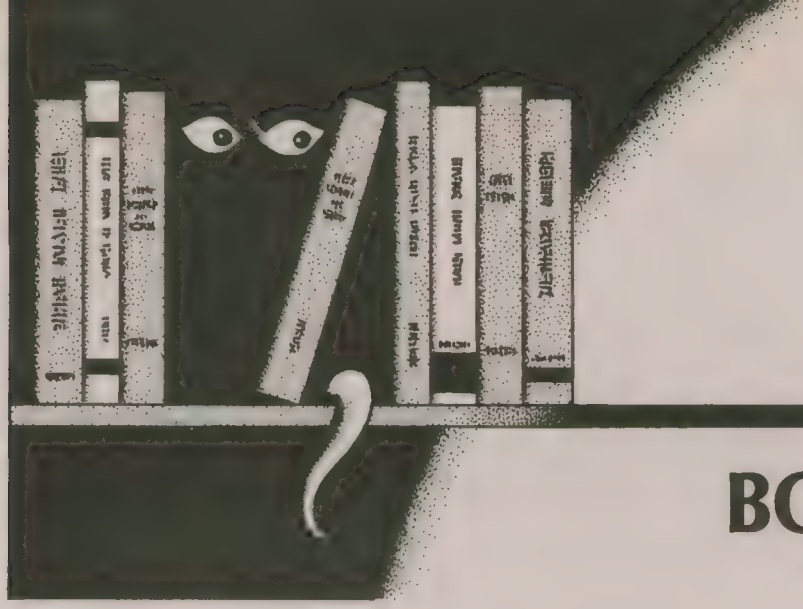

EDWARD BRYANT

BOOK REVIEWS

Everville (HarperCollins, $25.00, 698 pp) is a reminder—an extremely strong and provocative one—that Clive Barker is arguably the premier epic fantasist of our time. Much like such other luminaries as Stephen King and Dan Simmons, he works diligently to grow, to evolve, to avoid typecasting and pigeonholing. All of which is another way of saying that *Everville* is definitely not a repeat of either *Books of Blood* or *The Damnation Game,* the books that first catapulted Barker to stardom. Actually *Everville* is a sequel to 1989's *The Great and Secret Show.* The storyline and backdrop are complex, but *Everville* functions pretty well as a stand-alone narrative. Barker gives the new reader plenty of grounding, but attention will still have to be exerted to keep track of how the members of the extensive cast relate to one another.

The eponymous location is a small but bustling city in a high mountain valley in Oregon. It's probably a little like Eugene or Grant's Pass. Founded by young Maeve O'Connell, survivor of an ill-fated wagon train, Everville is located significantly close to a doorway to Quiddity, the sea of dream, the vast, unconscious ocean visited by humans only three times in their lives: at birth, first love, and death. In the first volume of this saga, a variety of humans and not-so-humans had wrestled for ultimate power in the sunny Los Angeles valley suburb of Palomo Grove. Vast numbers of things happened, but the upshot was the thwarting of the Iad Uroboros, vast, cool, unhuman entities (creatures that might have been collaboratively dreamed up by Wells and Lovecraft). For the time being, it looked as though the Iad Uroboros would not immediately be spilling through any cosmic rents into this world.

Well, time has passed and mischief is again afoot. Powers are set in motion. We meet Owen Buddenbaum, a long-lived man who lusts for power (he also, over the decades, catalogued about three dozen instances in which he directly or indirectly inspired fictional characters). Owen is not a man of little ambition or ego.

We are introduced to Phoebe Cobb, perhaps Miss Everywoman, once a blue-collar worker in Everville, who finds herself on a quest to find her lover, Joe Flicker, who has become lost in the terra incognita beyond Quiddity's door. We once again meet Tesla Bombeck, woman on a Harley, still carrying the soul and consciousness of the ape Raul sharing her head. The stage eventually welcomes Harry D'Amour, the tough private investigator from "The Last Illusion." We encounter ghosts and victims, demons and shapeshifters, all the distinctively odd chimeric creations of Barker's mind.

Like any other good epic, there's a quest. Well, actually several. There's jeopardy and loss, desperate struggle and triumph. As one would expect, Barker includes a strong vein of sensuality and eroticism in the novel. Sexuality is diverse here. And it's convincing. Phoebe finds herself, at one point, meeting Joe in the depths of Quiddity, in dream. She's under the surface—in so many ways—and finds herself enveloped in some sort of animate plantlife: "She started to let out little gasps of bliss, and reached out to left and right of her to take handfuls of the weed. It responded to her attentions instantly, wrapping lengths of itself around her wrist and elbows to anchor her, and swaying against her body with fresh abandon, its strands, soft though they were, falling on her naked back like gentle whips, rousing her dreamed skin, her spirit skin, to new heights of sensation."

There are multiple identities, illusion, unmasking, and the dramatic unveiling of avatars from the previous novel. All the traditional tools of storytelling are employed

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expertly. The only time I found myself questioning the technique of the tale, were a few instances when the dialogue felt very much like a film script; as though, perhaps, the author leapt for a shortcut when he realized there were still hundreds of pages left to write and a looming deadline.

The novel's strength, though, lies in its mythic quality. Clive Barker doesn't bluff—he seems to have a solid grasp, perhaps instinctive, certainly accomplished—of the images and invisible forces that affect human perceivers under the surface of skin and conscious mind.

The individual details are lovely. I'm impressed by such things as Harry D'Amour's tattoos. They're referred to as "protective ink; talismans and sigils etched into the clients' skin to keep the bad at bay." Or "stale incense and week-old sushi—the odors, in short, of bad magic." The novel's full of these bits, along with all the larger issues.

In short, *Everville*'s steeped in magic. And that magic informs the process of reading and enjoying it. It has been suggested elsewhere that rock stars are the contemporary incarnations of traditional shamans. Perhaps. But to write such an illusory and transformational work as *Everville*, prose writer/filmmaker/dramatist Clive Barker demonstrates that he is, himself, an accomplished shaman.

In the past few years, a significant portion of Richard Matheson's return to prolific writing and publication has been his westerns. Novels *Journal of the Gun Years* and *The Gun Fight*, and the collection *By the Gun* were all published in hardback by M. Evans and in paper by Berkley. Now *Shadow on the Sun* (Evans, $18.95, 176 pp) has appeared in the same tandem formats. It's a novel and yes, it's a western.

It's *also* a novel of supernatural horror. All Matheson's work published outside the field of the fantastic, I feel, bears a genuine interest for readers of sf and fantasy. But this Q-ship hiding of *Shadow on the Sun*'s dual nature as a horror novel is especially sneaky.

And no, lest some of you fear I'm trying to gull you with some sort of subtly slipsteam piece of historical magic realism, *Shadow on the Sun*'s about as blatant a piece of loose-demon-tearing-up-the-Old West fiction as you could want.

It's the latter nineteenth century in southern Arizona and Indian agent Billjohn Finley's worked seven years to hammer out a truce and subsequent treaty between the U.S. Government and Braided Feather's Pinal Spring band of Apaches. It's been a bloody chunk of time and both sides, though wary to the extreme, are ready for peace.

But even as the treaty's signed, two young local men, watching from a nearby mountainside, are savagely slain by something or some*one* with apparently superhuman strength and supernatural appetites.

The victims' brother thinks the Apaches are the killers. The Indian agent, an extremely enlightened man for his time, has a limited amount of time to figure out what's going on and who the killer is.

In the meantime, there's a new dude in town, a big guy who could be either Anglo or Indian, who has a terrible scar ringing his neck, and who asserts that he once had his head cut clean off. No subtlety here. The guy's right, and Finley and his few allies catch on pretty quickly.

How Finley, accompanied by a skeptical Department of the Interior official and the less than enthusiastic son of the Apache chief, attempt to exorcise a demon in a rationalist western setting becomes the crux of the plot.

Matheson's a Compleat Professional. This is not a long tale, nor is it incredibly complex and ambitious. What it is, is a more than fair return for the reader's investment in time and money. It entertains. The characters are sketched just enough, and a few, such as the callow young guy from Interior, are handled quite adroitly. *Shadow on the Sun* is solid tale-telling. I don't know if the Native American mythology it's apparently based upon is authentic or not, but it sounds pretty reasonable.

If this were a film, it would be a solid, entertaining, low-budget feature. And, if we have any luck, maybe it eventually *will* be.

Stuart David Schiff deserves a medal. Of course his editing and publishing enterprises, a largely one-man entrepreneurial empire including Whispers Press, the small press magazine *Whispers*, and the six-volume *Whispers* anthology series, have won four World Fantasy Awards for Dr. Schiff (a dentist by vocation) and another handful-plus of major awards for his contributors.

But a general medal of recognition couldn't hurt. He's a living testament to the power and productivity of someone carving out an entire (albeit not as large as, say, Viking) publishing empire while simultaneously earning a living in another area. The magazine first published in 1973. The first of six hardback anthologies mixing new and reprinted material started appearing from Doubleday in 1977. A projected seventh volume will never appear, and some of the material slated for that project is published for the first time in *The Best of Whispers* (Borderlands Press, $65.00, 472 pp), a suitably lavish production.

Schiff mentions in his preface that the idea for *Whispers* first came about many years back when David Hartwell and he attempted to revive the old *Arkham Collector*, that odd periodical smorgasboard of fiction and nonfiction that appeared for eight volumes or so back in the '50s. August Derleth's successors apparently scotched the project. Eventually Schiff himself took the resurfaced idea, added a considerable amount of resources and elbow-grease, and started the whole thing up in 1973.

Schiff's an interesting editor, fairly eclectic in his outlook and bridging the aesthetic gap (and it's a wide one) between the old Lovecraftian era of often overstuffed formality and the new splatterpunk period of often underdone and sloppily sheer sensation.

For proof of that assertion, I suggest merely checking the roster of authors who appear in Schiff's capstone anthology: Ray Bradbury; the Tems, both Melanie and Steve; classic '50s sf writer Jerry Sohl; conservative thinker Russell Kirk; Connie Willis; Dennis Etchison; Fritz Leiber; and David J. Schow right there beside Hugh B. Cave. That is one catholic selection of writers.

The lead and the penultimate stories are both by the late Karl Edward Wagner. This, plus Schiff's acknowledgement of Wagner's contributions to the magazine, lend a particular poignancy to this book, since Wagner died while the volume was at press. Wagner's "Sticks" is a magnificently creepy tale of New England that only loses a little of its power later in the telling when the horrors start to edge into actual illumination onstage. "Beyond Any Measure," a World Fantasy Award-winning novella is another atmospheric piece, this one a Gothic-tinged account of vampirism and a peculiar haunting.

Some of the stories appearing here for the first time include Whitley Strieber's "I Walk the Night," a tale of love and pain about a man disfigured by disease who finds an unusual—and ultimately touching—sanctuary with a hooker. This is one of those stories, were it developed for the movies, would probably trigger the producer to call Jaye Davidson's agent. And it would be a good property to consider.

Ray Bradbury's "The Screaming Woman" is reminiscent of his vintage fiction (and well it should; it's a variant version of one of his classics), introducing us to a ten-year-old girl who discovers that adults just won't listen (in so many ways) when she reports hearing a woman screaming under the ground in her neighbor's yard. "Fingers" by Melanie Tem is an affecting portrait of an elderly man haunted by guilt, and the problem of communication among generations.

Reprints include the splendid "The Button Molder" by Fritz Leiber; David J. Schow's startlingly nostalgic and gentle "One for the Horrors;" and Ramsey Campbell's grisly "The Chimney." The volume concludes with an early version of Lucius Shepard's incredible vampire novel, *The Golden*, a state intended for a special Shepard issue of *Whispers* that will remain unpublished.

I mentioned earlier that this edition is nicely turned out. The jacket and frontispiece are both eerie, surreal work by Lee Brown Coye. Only the irritating surplus of typos diminishes what is otherwise an exemplary edition of a foundation work.

So far as the contents are concerned, this is a must for dark fantasy readers.

Well, here's a new one from St. Martin's and it's another vote against conformity. *The Unnatural* ($21.00, 256 pp) is the first novel from Clarion graduate David Prill and it probably belongs on the same general shelf as Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One* and Peter Beagle's *A Fine and Private Place*. In other words, it's about the world

of the newly breathing-challenged and it's very, very funny indeed. Not as mordant as Waugh, not so fantastical as Beagle, Prill stakes out his own turf. The world of *The Unnatural* is our world, several years in the future, illuminated with severe warpage. And if you read or saw *The Natural*, it won't take long to pick up on Prill's angle of approach to the mortuary trade.

You'll meet young Andy Archway, a young Minnesotan and aspiring competitive embalmer. He even runs a cottage mortuary industry out of his parents' home when he's "discovered" by the great mortuary scout, Wallace "Wake" Wakefield. A kid with a unique talent for working with the dead, Andy is quickly recruited by Wakefield. His father negotiates for a fat on-signing recruitment bonus. Before you can say "Jessica Mitford," our Andy, a young man sublimely handy with a trocar, heads off to mortuary college to make his new owner, P.T. Sunnyside, a happy man. Actually Andy has his own ambition—he wants to beat the single-season embalming record (1,769, set by the legendary Janus P. Mordecai in 1942). Unfortunately such a record is mighty hard to approach, let alone shatter, outside of wartime. But Andy's a young American guy with a cockeyed dream, and you know he's not going to allow himself to be stopped.

But also like a lot of other young men, Andy finds the world a little more complex than he expected. Upon graduation from the Thomas Holmes University of Embalming and Funerary Practices, Andy finds himself abruptly trapped in a war between Sunnyside and a rival corporation headed by the midget Drabford brothers. It's an economic battle of "pre-need" and "post-need" funerary industry.

On the personal front, he must face up to the dark temper of the young woman he spurned throughout his college years, Maria Eldorado. And finally Andy must negotiate his twisted destiny in the impoverished Latin American nation of Soma, a land where starvation may well give the young embalmer the opportunity to best the Mordecai record.

Whether the novel's planting us in a gothic Midwest crammed with canning sculptures, Bible and Bait Shops, and mobius-strip electric trains; or showing us theme-park hells in California that thoroughly dwarf Forest Lawn; *The Unnatural* completely enthralls.

This novel is reminiscent of the '50s extrapolative Pohl/Kornbluth/Del Rey sf novels in which dry, sometimes nasty, humor was employed to show us what life would be like if the ad industry/insurance business/lawyers took over the world.

This time it's an obsessive view of the funeral biz-as-major-power, recounted as though Joe R. Lansdale were writing dialogue for Garrison Keilor. *The Unnatural* is amusing and quirky satire that functions well on its own terms; in other words, it works just fine as its own book—you don't have to read this with one eye on the outside referents to appreciate it. David Prill is a fine, funny, and provocative new teller of tales.

Michael Arnzen is a veteran of the specialty press magazine jungle. Recently Dark Regions Press published his story collection, *Needles and Sins*. Two years ago he had the distinction of seeing a story published in *Outlaw Biker's Tattoo Review* and reprinted in Karl Wagner's *The Year's Best Horror Stories XX*. *Grave Markings* (Dell Abyss, $4.99, 384 pp) incorporates that tale into its text.

Grave Markings is a novel which devotes considerable space to both manic serial atrocities and tattooing. *ReSearch* readers should love it. But the appeal will go far beyond just fans of tribal skin art and the new primitivism. Arnzen spins his tale with amiable ferocity.

Grave Markings leads with quotes from Wilde and Joyce, and then a new poem called "Skin" by Steve Rasnic Tem. After that, the novel's structure begins a little misleadingly as we meet a deranged tattoo artist named Mark Kilpatrick. In a wonderfully surreal inner safari, Kilpatrick shuttles between ugly memories of child abuse and hallucinatory visions of an inner art gallery wherein the shocking images can be purged only by . . . Well, therein lies the engine of the story.

Abruptly the reader discovers that Kilpatrick is receding into the background for most of the novel. The true protagonist, it would seem, will be Roy Roberts, city news editor for a Colorado Springs TV station. Roberts quickly gets pulled into the plot when his buddy, a homicide sergeant named John Lockerwood, gives him a scoop on a murder victim who's been fried with a jump-start from a big Harley. But the really bizarre aspect of the killing is that the victim's entire body is covered with a spectacularly grotesque tattoo; sort of a Gigeresque Motorhead biomechanical triumph.

We meet some of Roy's colleagues at the station: tightly wound newscaster Judy Thomas, and Dan Schoenmacher, the weatherman who's starting to come apart from the center. They come across as very real; hardly like the cast of the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*.

The novel evolves both as the maddened and increasingly fragmented Kilpatrick continues to do terrible and beautiful things to people's hides; and the alienated news editor Roberts, in the course of the investigation, becomes friends with Corky, an ace tattoo artist. Eventually Roberts knows he has to go under the needle if he is to grasp some understanding of an increasingly lunatic world.

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Kilpatrick's eccentric orbit and those of the TV station staff increasingly overlap. And almost as a mere sidelight, author Arnzen gives us a quick view of a lesser victim that is one of the most horrific images in recent fiction. Any novel that sets you back on your heels at least once can't be all that bad.

And *Grave Markings* certainly isn't bad at all. Actually I think it's pretty good, even if the author occasionally makes some pacing, onstage/offstage placings, and other writing choices I don't always agree with. It's interesting to note what he opts to show up front and what he doesn't. The narrative is absolutely fascinating, though, and always riveting. This is a book in which, even if you occasionally wish to look away, you cannot. Arnzen makes damned sure you come along for the whole ride, and that you pay attention as he articulates what he wishes to say about art and pain, obsession and identity.

Even readers not terribly knowledgeable about the subject matter may find plenty of arcane questions to debate with the author. Just how toxic *is* squid ink when used to tattoo human skin? (But you do get a great lesson in how to butcher a free-range squid at home in your kitchen.) And how workable would it be, after shaving a calico cat, to tattoo its entire body since the skin tones would reflect the color differences of the coat? (Don't worry; the cat survives and prospers much more handily than any of the humans.)

So I enormously enjoyed Michael Arnzen's initial effort as a novelist; but I wish Dell had thought to include some cool temporary tats—or even better, a gift certificate for some real skin work—in randomly selected volumes. Now *that* would be show biz.

Short Takes

This year Joe R. Lansdale won the Bram Stoker Award for superior achievement in "Other Media" for his 1993 five-issue mini-series for D.C. Comics, *Jonah Hex: Two-Gun Mojo* ($12.95, 120 pp). Now D.C./Vertigo's issued the series as a trade paperback graphic novel. This is the line that's published considerable amounts of Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman in graphic formats. Jonah Hex appeared in John Albano's comic in the '70s, a tough, edgy series suggesting a fair amount of the Sergio Leone/Clint Eastwood Italian western influence. Lansdale's taken that tone and added the sheen of dark fantasy. In *Two-Gun Mojo,* bounty hunter and one-time Johnny Reb Hex finds himself railroaded into an undeserved hanging, before winding up enmeshed in the clutches of one Doc "Cross" Williams and his Wagon of Miracles. The Doc's a half-assed resurrectionist who's learned a muddled version of the Haitian corpse-raising arts. He's good enough that he's reanimated the stolen body of Wild Bill Hickock, as well as assembling a bizarre coterie of circus freakazoids around himself. The Doc eventually figures that Jonah Hex would make a perfectly fine zombie. All this is revolving around Lansdale's oft-used setting of Mud Creek, Texas, a burg that's seen a lot of grotesque activity in its time. The narrative's violent and bloody—but then so was the part of the nineteenth century in which it's set. Lansdale's in his usual rare form of voice and detail. Tim Truman's art, inked by Sam Glanzman and colored by Sam Parsons, is completely appropriate to the subject matter. There's nobody better able to bring out the gothic weirdness of the Old West than Joe R. Lansdale. This is a first-class example of that distinctive sensibility.

"A Conversation With Ed Gorman"

Richard Anderson

CEMETERY DANCE: Your first novel was published ten years ago. What've you learned about writing and publishing in that time?

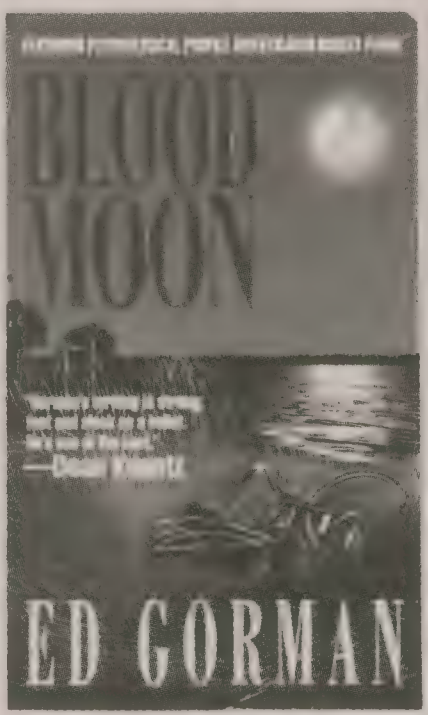
ED GORMAN: About writing I've learned that you must be true to your feelings. You have to write about people and subjects that rile you in some way, love or pity or hatred. About publishing I've learned that you must consciously force yourself to become a better writer, to constantly give yourself new and difficult problems to solve as a craftsman, otherwise you start repeating yourself, and that's always deadly for writer and reader alike.

CD: Is that why you're written so many different kinds of novels, because you're afraid of repeating yourself?

GORMAN: I think I've been searching, through a large number of books, to find the novels I'm best suited to write. Under a pen-name, I did two Mary Higgins Clark-type books and learned that I don't live there, and consequently had nothing to bring home. I did one pen-name espionage novel and learned the same thing, that while there are elements of the espionage novel I can use in my best work, the espionage novel per se is not my style. The same is true with private eye novels. I did one or two that I thought were decent enough — *The Autumn Dead* and *A Cry of Shadows* — but they exhausted my writing interest in the private eye novel per se. I still read private eye fiction and like a lot of it but I can't see myself writing any more traditional p.i. novels.

CD: You did a wonderful book last year, *Blood Moon*, that some people think is your best book to date. Isn't the Robert Payne character a private eye?

GORMAN: Yes and no. Technically, he's a psychological profiler who has a private investigator's license. But he's far more profiler than gumshoe. Plus, I tell a two-track story, about a third of the novel is seen through the eyes of the villain. I stole this two-track idea from an Iowan named Bill S. Ballinger, who wrote *Portrait In Smoke*, which is one of the great *noirs*.

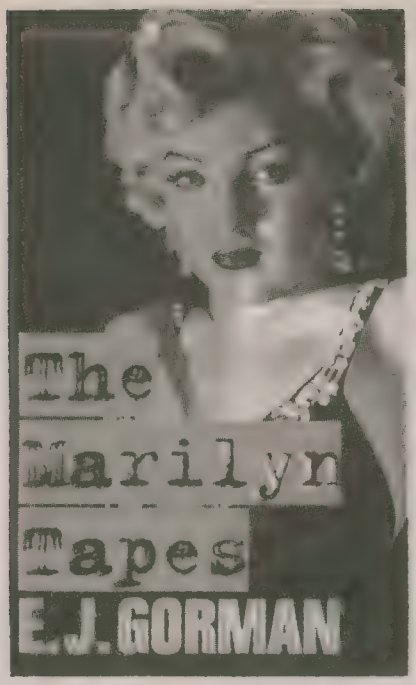


CD: Explain the two-track idea.

GORMAN: Well, you have one storyline from the hero's point-of-view and another storyline, as in the case of *Blood Moon*, from a sort of "floating" point-of-view. You're not sure who this person is or how he bears on the main storyline. Now, in *Hawk Moon*, the sequel that was recently published by Headline in England and will be released over here in February 1996, I stole an idea from Marcia Muller and Bill Pronzini. In their *Beyond The Grave*, they have a 100 year old unsolved murder that bears on a murder their sleuths are investigating today.

CD: You don't mind admitting that you steal?

GORMAN: (Laughs) Not at all. All smart writers steal. In fact, there's a Hemingway quote that goes something like, "Great writers don't borrow, they steal." Hemingway was modestly telling us that he was a great writer, of course, but I think he's right. Writing is, to a great degree, larceny. You pick the pockets of the living and the dead. Now, I must say that I try to bring my own slant to everything I borrow. For instance, what I did



with a 100 year old murder is very different from what Marcia and Bill did. But I wouldn't have had the idea if I hadn't read their novel first. And I certainly do this with Dean Koontz. I think I've lifted around 1,436 ideas, plot structures and plot lines from him. I always remember the story about how Max Brand would read half of somebody else's novel, then put it down and use it as the basis of the next novel he'd write. That's a lot more mechanical than I care to be but it certainly illustrates the principle I'm talking about.

CD: Did you have a prototype in mind for *The Marilyn Tapes*?

GORMAN: Not really. I did a long draft, which I hated and threw away — 600+ pages and God it was painful to dump them — but in the course of that draft, I at least learned how *not* to write it. A conventional structure just wasn't going to work. Bob Gleason, the editor, had a lot of great ideas, and between us we figured out how to approach it.

CD: The publicity release says you spent two years on it.

GORMAN: Indeed. I'd work on *Marilyn* in the morning and a second novel in the afternoon. I learned to like that particular rhythm so I still do that sometimes — two books at once. By the time I finished the fifth draft of *Marilyn*, I'd written three shorter novels. None of this could have been done without Larry Segriff, by the way, who helped me keep everything straight. He also did a masterful edit of the third draft, which was where everything started to come together.

CD: *The Marilyn Tapes* seems to play all the instruments in the orchestra — it's funny, bitter, angry, sad, informative, sexy, exceedingly violent and about as nasty a take on U.S. politics as I've ever seen. You seem to hate the Kennedys as much as you do J. Edgar Hoover.

GORMAN: In certain ways, I do. I don't like the idea of American royalty, to begin with, and then the notion of dynastic politics on top of that — Actually, I didn't care for any of the historical people in *The Marilyn Tapes*. Hoover was not only The Grand Inquisitor, he was also the embodiment of The Peter Principle, a completely incompetent little bureaucrat.

CD: *Shadow Games* is a very different book. Critic Michael Ross says it's "Nathaniel West meets Cornell Woolrich, great rage, great sorrow, and a truly cathartic ending." I know that your cousin was child star Bobby Driscoll who won an Academy Award in 1951, and then died twelve years later as a junkie. Did Driscoll inspire you to write the book?

GORMAN: I'd always wanted to do my "Bobby" book (we were first cousins, and roughly the same age, and so I knew a lot of Hollywood anecdotes) but what really set me to work was all the press stories about child stars in the mid-eighties. They have a very sad plight. I always remember Danny Bonaduce's scornful line about how sick he was of hearing all these former child stars whining about their fates. Danny said he was a perfectly normal guy and that his days on "The Partridge Family"

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hadn't affected him at all. This is the same guy who'd slugged a transvestite hooker and then hid out from the cops. I guess I must have missed that particular storyline when they used it on "Ozzie and Harriet."

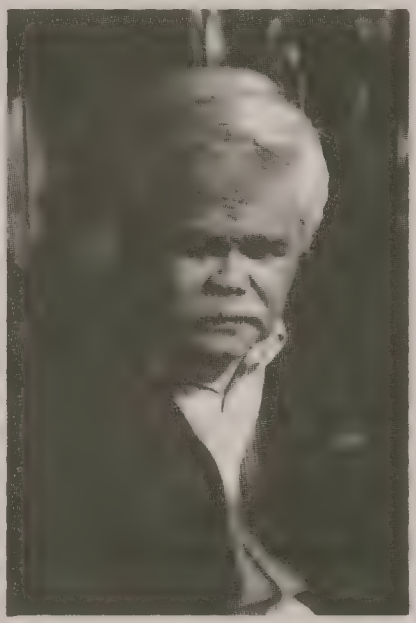
CD: What surprised me about *Shadow Games* was all the very subtle but very dark humor. A lot of reviewers seem to have missed that.

GORMAN: I just felt that the book was so bleak thematically that it needed some comic relief now and then. So I interwove all this quiet but very sarcastic stuff into it and had a good time doing it.

CD: *Cages*, your new short story collection, seems to me a seminal book of genre fiction. What's amazing is that you don't really do anything new in terms of form — it's the writing itself, and the characters, that make it all seem so fresh.

GORMAN: My generation of movie-makers wasted a lot of time trying to change the form of movies, and they did so with only modest success. But they never seemed much interested in changing the content of movies. Look at *The Graduate* today. It still pleases the eye but I don't think it says very much. It's rather smug and safe, in fact. I think it's always a mistake to think of form first and content second, as the literary formalists do. The same thing happened in science fiction with too many of the New Wavers. Harlan Ellison was one of the very, very few writers who was able to change form and content at the same time. In that regard, he was Hemingwayesque. Even given the fact that Hemingway stole all sorts of things from Stephen Crane and Mark Twain, he was a complete original. Most of us, however, aren't gifted with originality, so we have to be judged by what we bring to more familiar structures and material.

CD: Though you published a good deal of it early in your career, science fiction always seemed to elude you. But the two sf stories in *Cages*, "Cages" and "Survival" are



two of the most powerful stories you've ever written. Just astonishing. And "Cages" is new in form as well as content.

GORMAN: I lucked out. I found the proper themes, I was in the proper mood to address those themes, I had sufficient skills to do them, and I did them. I may never again write another good sf story .

CD: As much as you knock your Daniel Ransom horror novels, the horror and fantasy in *Cages* is first-rate, particularly "The Face" and "The Morning of August 18th" and "Yesterday's Dreams." Really strong. Do you still advise people away from your Ransom Books?

GORMAN: I like *The Serpent's Kiss* all right but the rest of them are baboonic junk. Not even worth talking about. In fact, I've written a number of books that, if not quite bad, are certainly empty in the way the Ransoms are.

CD: A New York editor told me that your novel *Death Ground* was one of the best westerns of the past decade. Do you plan to write more?

GORMAN: I was recently contacted by an agency that specializes in westerns and they said they could guarantee me a very decent sum of money if I'd write a book for them. They say they can line up all these foreign and audio sales in advance. It's tempting and I may do it someday. But right now, much as I love westerns, I'm concentrating on big suspense novels.

CD: You're still a largely unknown writer.

GORMAN: I used to say that I was a nobody in three different genres until one wise-ass reader wrote me and said that I was overlooking my science fiction — that I was actually a nobody in *four* genres.

CD: You need to be in paperback.

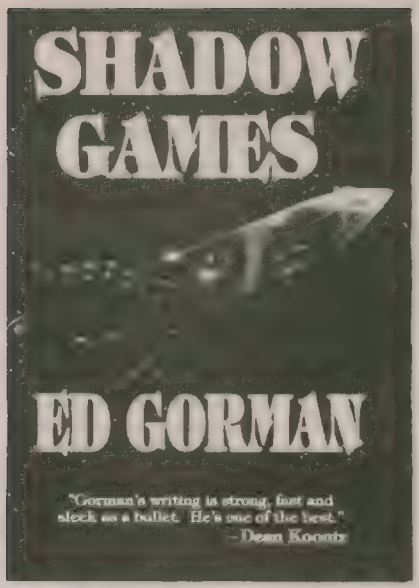
GORMAN: Yes, and that's about to happen. Within the next sixteen months, *Blood Moon*, *The Marilyn Tapes*, *Cold Blue Midnight*, and the four-book cycle of Leo Guild westerns will be issued in mass market.

CD: Ten years you've edited *Mystery Scene*. High points?

GORMAN: Meeting all the great writers and readers of the mystery field. Very nice, very talented people.

CD: Low points?

GORMAN: The fight I picked with Donald Westlake. I didn't handle it well in any respect, and hurt a lot of feelings for no good purpose. Westlake is somebody I genuinely respect and I apologize to him here for what I did. I've stolen far too much from his books



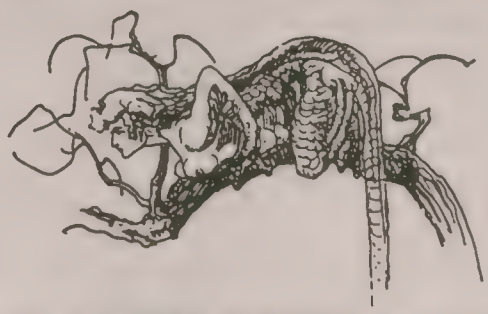
to ever have the moral authority to attack him the way I did.

CD: People who know you well say you're a much kinder, gentler guy than you were ten years ago.

GORMAN: Probably. I still wore all my ad-man armor in those days, I suppose. But these days . . . I have the life I want and it's because of my wife Carol. She's taught me to hate myself at least a bit less, and to relax more often, and to appreciate my blessings, which are considerable. We're going on fourteen years of marriage now and they've been the best years of my life. I hate to think of where I'd be if I hadn't met Carol.

CD: She's a writer, too.

GORMAN: Yes, and a very good one. Her YAs have won many of the most prestigious awards, including the New York Ethical Culture Award, and her paperback mysteries are selling extremely well. Her two latest books, *Jennifer The Jerk Is Missing* and *The Miraculous Makeover of Lizard Flanagan*, are also doing extremely well.



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ANIMAL RITES

JAY R. BONANSINGA

JAY R. BONANSINGA is the author of the recent paperback, *SICK*, and last year's critically-acclaimed road thriller, *The Black Mariah*. "Animal Rites" is lean and mean and very nasty.

Stirring awake, Daddy Norbert found himself tied to a moldy Lazy Boy in the tool shed out back of the garage. Head felt like a rusty nail had been driven into it. Something sticky was digging into his belly. Would have rubbed his puss-bleary eyes, but he found his big calloused mitts hog-tied to the springs beneath him.

"Whylmmmphrump—?" Daddy's query was sabotaged by stupid lips.

"Good!" The voice popped out of the shadows like a firecracker. "You're comin' awake."

"—llliiihhsh—?" Although Daddy's mouth was still asleep, his eyes were sharpening, beginning to make out a faint figure before him.

"Takes it a spell to wear off," the voice said.

Daddy Norbert blinked. "Lizzy . . . ? That you?"

"Yessir."

"The hell is going on?!"

Stone silence.

Daddy Norbert blinked some more, and started putting things together. His teenage step-daughter Lizabeth must have slipped him a mickey back at the house and dragged him out here to the tool shed. Girl was seriously wrong in the head. Been that way ever since her mama died. Getting skinnier and skinnier, messin' with that faggoty colored boy up to Little Rock. Now the girl must've gone stark raving screwy. Crouching in the shadows across from Daddy, fiddling with something that sounded like a tin cup with a nail in it. Girl was crazy as a cross-eyed loon.

"Almost ready," the voice finally said. "Just hold your horses."

"What in the wide friggin' world of sports is going on?!"

"Be still."

"What did you slip me, girl?"

"Called Tranxene. It's temporary, so just shut up and sit still for a minute."

"Don't you sass me!"

Skinny little bitch didn't even react, just kept on working with that rattling box of metal. Daddy's eyes were adjusting to the dark. He could see strips of old duct tape wrapped around his massive girth. Something leather was holding his head in place like blinders on a plough horse. Smelled like wet dog fur. Daddy swallowed hard. "Lizzy—why you doin' this?"

"It's a secret."

"Whattya mean, secret?"

"You'll see."

"I'm sorry," he told her all of a sudden. His bowels were beginning to burn, his mouth going dry as wheat meal. It was dawning on him, this girl could very easily hurt him. Maybe hurt him a lot. "I'm sorry for what I did to you and your mama. You hear me? I'm tellin' ya how sorry I am."

No answer.

"Lizzy—?"

She switched on the light.

The sudden glare of an old aluminum scoop light exploded across the shed. Blinking fitfully, Daddy saw the shriveled carcasses splayed across his work bench to his left. His future projects. Parts of a rabbit, a young fox, the hind end of a bobcat. Rusty traps were arrayed across the walls. Behind him, mounted on a shim of hardwood, a deer looked on, its lifeless eyes glimmering.

Daddy looked down at Lizzy and drew in a sudden breath.

She was on the floor, securing one of Daddy's favorite guns, a custom Roberts rifle, into a weird contraption of metal and wood. Looked like a spring loaded skeet shooter. The rattling sound that Daddy had heard must've been the bullet. Lizzy was loading a .219 Zipper into the gun's chamber. The Zipper was Daddy's favorite brand. A 90-grain heavy power compression load, the bullet would take down an adult Elk bull at two-hundred yards.

The barrel of the rifle had a bead drawn right smack dab on Daddy.

"Now hold on, child—!" Daddy Norbert started breathing hard, fighting his restraints, electric current shooting up his spine. Fear made his sphincter contract. "Y-y-y-y-y-y-y-y-y-you ain't gonna shoot me—just simmer down now!"

"There," Lizzy said softly to herself, finishing the load as though she had just put a cake in the oven. She stood up and gazed at Daddy emotionlessly, her eyes

rimmed in dark circles. She looked like a person who had just come home from a funeral. Drained and wrung out. She was holding a jury-rigged triggering device—the pull-string from an old push mower. It was tethered to the Roberts. Underneath Lizzy's sleeveless blouse, a tank top had the letters P.E.T.A. imprinted on it. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. Daddy had never seen that before.

"Taste it?" she calmly asked him. "The fear?"

"Let-let-let-let-l-l-let go of that thing," Daddy stammered, "we can talk this out."

"Like the deer?" She bored her gaze into him. "You talk things over with the deer?"

"Ww-w-w-w-wait-wait-wait-wait—! Just tell me w-w-w-w-w-w-w-what you want me to do? You want me to say I'm sorry? I'm sorry! Awright? I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

Lizzy didn't answer. Instead, she closed her eyes, bowed her head, and began mouthing a secret litany. Daddy Norbert started to say something else, but he stopped abruptly when he saw the objects in her other hand. Lizzy was grasping a handful of objects twined together with string. Sprigs of herbs or weeds or some other kind of nonsense that her Jamaican boyfriend had probably given her. Strands of hair, human hair maybe. A silk ribbon, a book-mark from Lizzy's old Concordance bible, and some other strands of unidentifiable fabric. But none of it currently seemed as important, or made as much of an impression on Daddy Norbert, as the tiny black objects hanging from the bottom of the thing.

The broken beads of her dead mother's rosary.

"Hold the phone—!" Daddy Norbert barked at her. "You ain't mad about no deer! You're still steamed about your goddamned ma! For God's sake, it ain't my fault she up and died! Already told you a million times, I'm sorry I hit her! You'd think I planted the goddamn cancer in her goddamn cervix myself! It weren't my fault! Now—Lizzy, just—stop it! STOP IT RIGHT NOW!"

Lizzy kept gazing at him.

"YOU SKINNY LITTLE HALF-PINT, PUT THAT GUN AWAY 'FORE I GIVE YOU ANOTHER WHOOPIN'!!"

Lizzy gripped the cable and smiled. Her face was a rictus of pain. "This is for you, great white hunter," she uttered. It sounded rehearsed.

Then she pulled the cable.

"AAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHH–!!"

Eyes slamming shut, Daddy Norbert winced. Matter of fact, he winced so hard a little squirt of shit spurted from his anus. He thought he heard the pop. The sharp blast of the hammer hitting the pin, and the bones shattering in his face. But he must've imagined it. Actually, he felt nothing. Just the warmth in the seat of his pants and the painful throb of his heart.

He opened his eyes.

At first, he figured the gun must've misfired. There was a thin veil of smoke rising in the light, and Daddy thought he smelled the oily aroma of gunpowder. Lizzy was backing toward the door, her gaze still riveted to the man. What the hell was going on? Why was she looking at him like that?

"For you . . . " she whispered as she slipped through the door and into the cool Arkansas night.

"What the—?"

Daddy looked down at the gun and studied it for another moment. The black hole of its barrel was staring at him, the smoke diffusing, the silence like a block of ice over Daddy's head. Daddy blinked again and suddenly there were tears in his eyes. All at once, he realized just how lucky he really was. "I'll be a

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sonofabitch," he muttered, grinning to himself in spite of his frayed nerves. "Twenty-three years in the woods, and not one dud, and tonight the god damned thing decides to misfire!"

He began to giggle.

"I'll be a swivel-hipped sonofabitch! Goddamned misfire! GOD DAMNED MISS-FUCKING-FIRE!! WHOOPTY-DO-AND-FUCK-ME-BLUE!!" Daddy laughed and laughed and laughed, and then he looked down at the gun.

His laughter died.

Something had appeared in the mouth of the barrel. Something round. Just barely poking out, the light shining off it like a tiny planet. At first, Daddy wondered if it was an obstruction, an odd fragment of metal that had gotten wedged in there after a misfire during his last hunting trip. The thing looked familiar, the blue steel gleam winking in the dim light.

The .219 calibre Zipper.

"Holy fuckin' shit," Daddy uttered, staring at the bullet peeking out of the barrel. He'd heard stories of freak misfires, bullets getting lodged in barrels and such. But he never really believed them. Always figured it was whiskey talk, nothing more. Grin widening, he closed his eyes. "Sweet Jesus, Lord in heaven, I realize I ain't been to church in a month of Sundays, but I wanna thank y'all just the same."

A chill breeze wafted in through the half-ajar door, and it cooled the beads of sweat on Daddy's forehead. He opened his eyes, grinning like an idiot. He could smell the surrounding farms, the sorghum, manure and wet hay. The odors never smelled so good to Daddy Norbert. He was alive, and that was all that mattered. Next step was to figure out how to get out of this fucking chair. Glancing down at the rifle, he took one last gander at the bullet.

His smile faded.

The bullet had moved, just a tad. Matter of fact, if Daddy Norbert was any less familiar with the shape of the Zipper's casing, he might have not even noticed. But there it was, poking out of the barrel, one, maybe two additional inches of casing. Daddy swallowed air. Maybe it was just a trick of the light, op'kil illusion or whatever you call it. He studied the muzzle of the Roberts and felt his heart flip-flop in his chest.

The bullet was halfway out the barrel.

"Gotta have that damn thing checked." He chuckled softly. "Ain't that a kick."

Daddy stared at the rifle. If he didn't know better, he could have sworn the bullet had moved some more. Moved with the subtle steadiness of a clock. 'Course, that was impossible. That was damn near mad-hatter crazy. He took a breath and tried to rip his arms free. The rope held tight. His fingers were going numb, and he could feel the mess in his pants, burning his butt crack, stinking to high heaven.

"Wait'll I get my hands on that skinny little—!"

All at once, Daddy Norbert noticed the bullet was protruding nearly all the way out of the barrel now. Defying gravity. He blinked, and he blinked, and he blinked some more, and he still saw it. With his very own watery eyes. The Zipper was sticking almost clean out of the muzzle. Daddy wondered if a strange pocket of air had gotten trapped in the muzzle behind it . . . or something like that. Didn't really matter though, because the bullet was going to clear the lip of the barrel any second now and fall to the floor.

Except it didn't fall.

"What the fuck—?"

Daddy gawked. Damn bullet hung in midair in front of the muzzle like a moth in aspic. No visible means of support. And Daddy got to thinking all of a sudden, thinking about Lizzy and that shit she was holding in her hand a minute ago and how she had that screwy look in her eye. Something cold and hard started turning in Daddy's gut. Chills rolled up his back, and the tiny hairs stood at attention along the back of his neck. The duct tape was digging into his belly. His head throbbed against its restraint. The worst part wasn't the fact that the bullet was frozen in space, which was pretty goddamned impossible if you thought about it for a second. Wasn't even the fact that it seemed to be slowly yet steadily inching forward.

The worst part was that it was heading straight for Daddy Norbert.

He frowned. The bullet was out of the muzzle by several inches now, moving through the space between the gun and Daddy with the inexorable slowness of a sundial. It looked like a tiny grey stain in the air. Impossible. Goddamned impossible, but here it came. A two-hundred calibre magic trick. Maybe six feet, seven at the most, between the bullet and Daddy. At this rate, it would take the bullet at least ten minutes to reach him. Then what? Stupid thing would probably bump Daddy's nose and plummet to the floor like some second-rate levitation trick, like some throw-off from the Amazing El Moldo. "Piece of shit parlor trick!" Daddy giggled again, his voice stretched thin. "Can't scare me with some cheap dime store gag!"

The bullet continued coming.

A scalding tear of sweat ran down Daddy Norbert's forehead and pooled in his eye. It burned. Daddy blinked, and cursed, and strained against the leather head restraints. He shook furiously against the tape. It was no use. Lizzy had done a bang up job on the bondage.

Daddy's laughter sputtered and died.

"This ain't possible," he uttered, suddenly stricken, his gaze glued to the bullet.

Daddy Norbert had never really believed in magic before. Growing up dirt poor in the Ozark Mountains, he'd certainly run across his share of hokum. One old

gal who lived behind the Norberts' pig farm was rumored to be a witch, but Daddy never believed it. Occasionally there'd be a gypsy clan who'd pass through the neighboring town. Some said it was gypsies that brought the drought of '49 to Pinkneyville. But Daddy never bought any of that hoodoo shit. Daddy Norbert was a simple hillbilly boy who grew up into a simple hillbilly man. Never got much of an education. Stayed out of trouble most of his adult life. Sure, he slapped his women around a little bit; he wasn't proud of it. But Jesus God, did he deserve this?

The bullet kept coming, crossing the halfway mark now, hanging in the air just as horrible as you please.

Something snapped inside Daddy Norbert, as sure as a guillotine in his brain. Fear. It stole his breath and flowed cool through his veins. Stung his eyes. Made his fists clench up like vices until blood started soaking the ropes. He'd been up against many a rough scrape in his day. Tangled with the Mueller boys down to Quincy. Got caught cheating at Anaconda on a river boat casino. Fought three cops on the side of the road once, got away with a single broken rib and a chipped tooth. But this was different, way over the edge; because all of a sudden Daddy realized this was what his own daddy used to call bad juju.

The bullet crept closer.

"Okay, okay, okay, okay—" Daddy started breathing deeply, trying to settle down, trying to convince himself it was all a trick, and that everything was going to be okay . . . but there was that shiny grey stain in the air coming right at him. And the leather binding holding his head in place. And the terrible certainty that Lizzy and her colored buck had planned this thing especially for Daddy. And that the bullet's destination was somewhere in the vicinity of Daddy Norbert's forehead, just above his left eye. *"Okay, okay, okay, okay, calm down, okay, get it together, calm down, calm down—"*

Daddy Norbert blinked.

Something sparked around the armature of the bullet. Sudden veins of light, erupting outward like the afterimage of a photographer's bulb. Faint lines mapping the darkness. A ghostly image curling around the zipper like a heat ray mirage cured in whiskey-misted eyes (*years ago, drooling drunk, his rough hands on pale flesh, wedging himself inside a young girl's thighs, forcing himself into her, again and again, the sound of her smothered cries)*

"Wwwwhhha—?!"

Daddy slammed his eyes closed.

The realization was like a claw hammer to his forehead. *Visions.* He remembered his grandmammy having visions of the end of the world, talking to Jesus in her sleep, and all of a sudden Daddy Norbert realized this was one of those kinds of visions. Daddy Norbert was having a vision of the end of the world. He was a sinner, he had done wretched things and now this was his very own reckoning day.

"Our father—who, who, who, who—art in heaven—hallowed by thy name, they, they, they—*SHIT—!!*"

Eyes popping open, Daddy saw that the bullet was less than two feet away now. So close, Daddy could see the serial number on its collar. He tried to swallow, but his spit was long gone. Throat like a lime pit. Piss spurting out of him. He didn't deserve this kind of hellish fate. Simple hillbilly, never got an education, never meant no harm, he just didn't deserve this. He began to cry. *"GET IT OVER WITH! JUST DO IT! FINISH IT!!"* His voice was like old metal tearing apart. *"GET IT OVER WITH!!"*

Twelve inches to go.

Another vision bloomed from the metal jacket. Veins of electric lightning threading out in all directions, coalescing into images, stormy images, apocalyptic images bombarding Daddy Norbert (*the snap of a belt on a woman's thick rear end, across the backs of her arms, drawing red streaks and welts . . . the red rain falling on parched ground, the locusts and the seven wax seals pealing away in the wind . . the strangled cries of his wife, begging for mercy, mercy, no mercy)* until he shook the memories off like gasoline on his face and cried so hard his snot ran across his lips in salty stringers. He prayed, and he bawled, and he begged God to come deliver him from this terrible trick.

Six inches now.

Daddy watched the bullet inching toward his forehead, his body convulsing with the fear and the tears and the shaking. The tape held him steady, the leather braced his head. Five inches. Four. Three. "Our-father-who-art-in-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-heaven—hallllll-hah-h ahhhh—!" The sudden flare of blinding light strangled off his voice.

He slammed his eyes shut and jerked backward with the force of the vision.

This time, the image was brutally clear.

(*daddy was naked, hunched in a thicket of weeds in the forest, breathing hard, trapped . . . he could smell his own spoor, the warmth of his fur and the tympany of his heart . . . his hooves were split and bleeding in the leaves . . . his antlers ached, and he could see the glint of something shiny through the trees across from him, the barrel of a well-seasoned Roberts rifle sticking out of the brush . . . then the flash of a shell exploding)*

At that moment, in the harsh light of the lonely tool shed, the cool metal tip of the bullet softly kissed Daddy Norbert's forehead just above the left eye . . .

. . . and kept coming . . .

. . . beginning Daddy Norbert's official, albeit long overdue, education.

— CD

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BOB MORRISH INTERVIEWS BLUE MOON BOOKS

SPOTLIGHT ON PUBLISHING

After a brief hiatus, this column returns to train the spotlight on yet another small press publisher. Our subject this time around is well, essentially it's Blue Moon Books. Never heard of them? That's because Blue Moon is sort of an umbrella company under which several publishing imprints operate. Blue Moon Books itself is actually a distribution company that was formed to distribute the various publishing imprints belonging to the company, as well as to distribute books from other small presses. Blue Moon carries books from several other publishers, including a few that have previously been profiled in *Spotlight on Publishing*—Deadline Press, Fedogan & Bremer, and Pulphouse Publishing.

But we're here to talk about publishers, not distributors. The same people that are behind Blue Moon Books distributing are also behind no less than seven publishing imprints: Silver Salamander, Hypatia Press, Darkside Press, Voyager Press, Special Editions Press, Paper Moon Press, and Arts Nova Press. Even if you're a small press aficionado, you're probably not familiar with *all* of those imprints, but that's not surprising, since a couple of them have yet to actually make their debut (although they should do so shortly).

Given this somewhat unusual, multi-imprint approach to publishing, it's only natural to wonder "why so many imprints?" The folks behind Blue Moon have an answer for that, and it's actually a pretty sensible one. But I'll let them tell you about that.

Speaking of the folks behind Blue Moon, they are: John Pelan, whose initial foray into publishing was Axolotl Press, which he founded and ran in the late '80s; Michael McLaughlin, who joined up with Pelan in 1992 to form Silver Salamander Press, which, as you'll see, has become something of a "cornerstone" imprint for Blue Moon; and Alan Newcomer, who was publishing under his own Hypatia Press imprint, as well as doing production work for other publishers, before teaming up with Pelan and McLaughlin to launch Blue Moon Books and its associated imprints. This interview was conducted with Newcomer, who operates Blue Moon Books out of Eugene, Oregon; his partners Pelan and McLaughlin handle their parts of the business from their homes in the Seattle area.

CD: I usually start these interviews by asking how the person first got involved in publishing, and I don't see any reason to break with tradition now, so . . . ?

AN: Let's see . . . once upon a time, there was a guy named Matt Hargreaves. At NorWesCon Nine in 1986, he published two chapbooks—one was an Anne McCaffrey and one was Avram Davidson—and at that particular convention both John Pelan and I were in attendance. And we were both quite impressed [by the chapbooks].

Pelan was talking with Tim Powers, and he said "I can do one of those. I can publish like that." And then he started Axolotl Press. I subsequently saw his first book and . . . wasn't impressed with the design—which wasn't John's fault, since he hadn't designed it. At the time, I was running Escape Books [a bookstore in Eugene] for [the owner] Bill Trojan, and Bill heard my reaction to the first Axolotl book, and he sort of threw down the challenge: "can you do better?" So I wound up starting Hypatia Press, and publishing Theodore Sturgeon's "Pruzy's Pot" [a short story in chapbook form].

Author Lucy Taylor and Publisher John Pelan

Hypatia staggered along for a while, and I eventually left the bookstore and picked up my own [publishing] equipment. Meanwhile, John got out of publishing for a while, and then we eventually connected.

CD: Let's fill in the gaps a little bit. I believe that John published . . . six books under the Axolotl imprint before telling that to Pulphouse, right . . . ?

AN: Right, and Pulphouse brought out a seventh book, which John had already contracted for. And Pulphouse has gone on to publish a couple of dozen more books under the Axolotl imprint.

After selling Axolotl, John stayed out of publishing for something like five years, because of a non-competitive clause in his contract with Pulphouse. But by the time that non-comp period was over, he was up and ready to go with Silver Salamander.

CD: Meanwhile, you had acquired some equipment to do "quick printing" production work for other publishers . . .

AN: Right, primarily for Starmont House, while Ted Dikty was still alive. I worked on . . . nearly a hundred titles for them.

CD: And you did some production work for Pulphouse?

AN: Well . . . I guess the best way to describe my relationship with Pulphouse would be to say that they came in and rented my equipment. The first Pulphouse books were done on my computers and my copy machine. But Dean [Wesley Smith, the publisher of Pulphouse] actually did the work, once I'd taught him how to use PageMaker.

CD: And you were also continuing to publish Hypatia Press titles, albeit somewhat sporadically.

AN: Right. Maybe . . . "moribund" would be the right term for Hypatia then—not quite dead. Or "pupating"—waiting to emerge as bigger, uglier caterpillar . . . I did publish a few books during that period: the *Strained Relations* anthology, and a limited edition of Tim Powers' *Drawing of the Dark* . . . but the press was fairly quiet.

CD: So how did you and John and Michael finally get together?

AN: Initially, John called me and . . . wound up doing his production through me because I gave him a good price. After that . . . remember that John and I got into publishing [separately] because of the Hargreaves chapbook we saw at NorWesCon in '86. Six years later, at NorWesCon in '92, I had three tables [in the dealers' room], and on those tables I had for sale my Hypatia Press books; I had Matt Hargreaves' new book; I had some Pulphouse stuff; and I had the new Silver Salamander book. So basically we were all there on one table and . . .

CD: Let me jump in here for a second. So for the first couple of Silver Salamander books, you were doing production work, but you weren't technically part of the company, right?

AN: Right, the first three books—Michael Shea's *I, Said the Fly*, Lucy Taylor's *Close to the Bone*, and Adam-Troy Castro's *Lost in Booth Nine*—were put together by me working as a production company *for* Silver Salamander.

CD: So—getting back to your story—what happened to cause the three of you to join forces?

AN: Okay . . . *Lost in Booth Nine* was brought out by Silver Salamander at WorldCon '93 in San Francisco, and . . . that was also when I had my two Hypatia Press P.C. Hodgell chapbooks coming out, and my Jerry Oltion collection. Those [Hypatia] projects I got done by . . . scraping together every penny I could, lying, cheating, stealing . . . you get the picture. And then, at the convention, I wound up acquiring rights to P.C. Hodgell's novel, *Seeker's Mask*. And, somehow, word got put out on the Internet, and Hodgell just has an incredibly faithful core of readers, who had been waiting seven years for this book. When I got home Monday morning after the convention, I had four phone calls about the Hodgell

book in the first twenty minutes, and about a dozen that day. By the end of the week, I had about sixty or seventy advance orders.

At that point . . . I had already cut a deal with Michael and John to not only push their books at conventions, but also to do sales for them—since I was pushing my own books to dealers already, I would just try to sell their Silver Salamander books as well. Since Michael and John both have full-time jobs, it was . . . attractive to them to have somebody out trying to sell their books full time.

CD: So Michael and John were partners in Silver Salamander right from the beginning, then?

AN: Right. They had become acquainted, and John wanted to get back into publishing after the Axolotl non-comp had expired, and Michael—who works at Microsoft—had the financial wherewithal to get it done. So . . . I had started to sell the Silver Salamander books, which only made sense, since in '92 and '93, when I was producing those first three books for them, I . . . probably wouldn't have been able to keep the doors open without the income that I got from those jobs. At that point, every job I did was a very important job! Anyway . . . it was to my benefit to sell their books, so that they would turn around and produce more books through me. And, around that time, I put out a catalog to dealers which listed the Hypatia books, the Silver Salamander books . . . and a couple of others. So right there were the seeds of the distribution concept that we later went with.

And . . . it was about that time that I sat down and figured out how much money it would cost me to publish *Seeker's Mask* and another book I wanted to do, *The Wizard of the Pigeons*. And I just sort of went, "oh, my God." So, I knew Michael by that point, and so I went to him and asked him if he was interested in becoming a partner. He talked it over with John, who was the only person in publishing that he knew really well, and we wound up throwing Silver Salamander and Hypatia in the same pot, but going with the overriding concept of the distribution company.

CD: So by the time that you actually published *Seeker's Mask*, the agreement was in place and you guys were working together?

AN: Yeah. If you look at the title page of *Seeker's Mask*, you'll see that it says Hypatia Press, distributed by Blue Moon Books.

CD: Okay . . . when you initially agreed to all work together, did you—in addition to deciding to do small press book distribution—also plan on having so many different imprints?

AN: Yeah. Basically, the original press release announced the creation of Blue Moon Books for the distribution of small press titles, etc.; and then, in the second paragraph, we announced the creation of two new presses: Darkside Press to do full-length dark fantasy work, and Voyager Press to do science fiction.

CD: Since that announcement, though, you've debuted a couple of *other* imprints before really establishing Darkside and Voyager . . .

AN: The other imprints have snuck in because there were books we wanted to publish that really didn't fit the . . . "definitions" of the existing imprints.

CD: Okay, so you've already defined Darkside and Voyager for us; what's the definition of the Silver Salamander imprint?

AN: Silver Salamander is a general imprint for science fiction, fantasy, and horror that is . . . I think John likes to categorize it as "cutting edge." It's been a little bit biased towards horror so far. Silver Salamander books are short story collections, and single works that are novella length at most. Which is the primary reason why the Lucy Taylor novel that we're doing [*The Safety of Unknown Cities*] is not a Silver Salamander book—although the subject matter fits the criteria of the press, the length does not, so we're doing it as a Darkside book instead . . .

. . . If you want to consider the "scope" or the "taste" of the Silver Salamander line, you should also take into account the books that John published under the Axolotl imprint. The Silver Salamander imprint is really a continuation of that.

CD: How about the Hypatia imprint? If Voyager is science fiction and Darkside is dark fantasy, how does Hypatia figure in the mix?

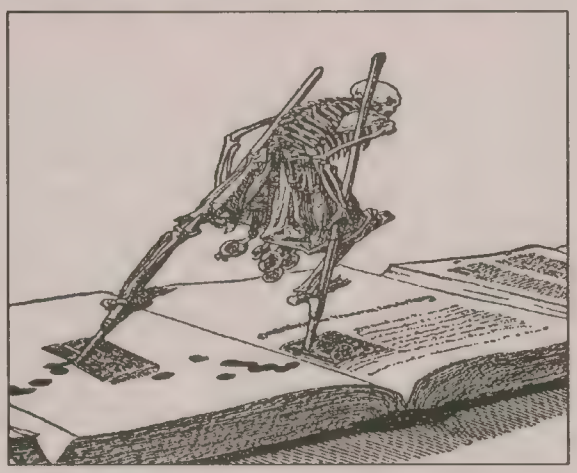
AN: If I'd been looking ahead, the Jerry Oltion collection [*Love Songs of a Mad Scientist*] that I published from Hypatia *should* have been a Voyager Press book, because it's clearly science fiction, and if you look at the rest of the Hypatia Press output, it's been pretty consistently fantasy . . .

The next Hypatia title we have planned is Nina Hoffman's *Thread That Bind The Bones* which, even though it won a Bram Stoker award for horror, concerns magic, and has a "delightful" feel to it; it's a fantasy. Also Charles de Lint's *Yarrow*, which is fantasy.

CD: So it's a fantasy press, but a different *style* of fantasy than that published by Darkside Press.

AN: Exactly. Hypatia does historical fantasy, quest fantasy, and so forth, while . . . Darkside Press

John Pelan cordially invites you to take a walk on the Darkside with:



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Trudging to Eden (Silver Salamander Press)
Thomas Ligotti
The Agonizing Resurrection of
Victor Frankenstein (Silver Salamander Press)
Nancy Springer
The Blind God is Watching (Silver Salamander Press)
Charles de Lint
Mulengro (Darkside Press)
Nina Kiriki Hoffman
Common Threads (Hypatia Press)

books generally have a much darker tone.

CD: Okay . . . give us a chronological rundown of the books that you've published since you three have joined forces.

AN: There was *Seeker's Mask* from Hypatia. And then at World Horror '94, we brought out Lucy Taylor's *Close to the Bone* collection [from Silver Salamander]. And then we did more Hypatia books by Hodgell—*Blood & Ivory* and *God Stalk/Dark of the Moon* [a two volume set]. Then the Thomas Ligotti collection, *Gothic Tales*, from Silver Salamander. And finally Nancy Springer's *The Blind God is Watching* and Kim Antieau's *Trudging to Eden*, both from Silver Salamander.

And there were a few chapbooks along the way. Let's see . . . there was a Hypatia "double" chapbook, *Wizard of the Pigeons/Silver Lady & The Fortyish Man*, by Megan Lindholm and Elizabeth Ann Scarborough. And *The Midwives*, another "double" chapbook of two stories, by Ru Emerson and P.D. Cacek. That [latter] one was under our Paper Moon Press imprint, which is basically going to be our chapbook line in the future.

CD: So all your future chapbooks will be under the Paper Moon Press imprint?

AN: Yeah. John has got a couple of . . . call them "testing the water" projects, where we don't really know how they're going to do, and figure that doing the chapbooks is a way to test them without too much risk.

CD: How about the Special Editions Press imprint? What's the rationale behind that, and how did you select the first book for the line, Charles Sheffield and David Bischoff's *The Judas Cross*?

AN: Warner decided to do *The Judas Cross* in paperback only, even though the last time Sheffield and Bischoff teamed up for a science/fantasy/horror book [*The Selkie*], it sold 10,000 copies in hardcover and 225,000 in paperback. So we knew there would be a market for a hardcover edition of a book by those two. Even though [*The Judas Cross*] is kind of a horror novel, it's also a thriller, and . . . it didn't really fit under any of our other imprints. So we decided to crank up another imprint and label it Special Editions—which is an accurate name, since we only published a 150-copy edition.

. . . Deciding to do *Judas Cross* as a Special Editions book kind of reflects our reasoning for using the various imprints in the first place—so that people who buy a book or two from one imprint, and like them, can *know* what kind of books to expect from that imprint in the future. I don't expect people who collect and follow Hypatia Press, for instance, to foam at the mouth about every new Hypatia title that comes out. But I *do* expect that if I publish two books that they really liked, that when I then publish a third book, they should be able to trust my editorial judgment, and pick up the third book, and be satisfied with it. [The reasoning behind using so many imprints] is so that people can collect the titles of a certain press without feeling pressured to buy things that they're really not interested in.

Also, unlike most other small presses—outside of Pulphouse—the affirmed goal of this company, at least from my standpoint, is to be commercially successful. In other words, I like designing books for a living, and I'll put the books together physically, and do whatever I have to do, to have that job. I wish it would pay better, of course, but being up here in Eugene and getting paid for the production work, as well as having a stake in the publishing, basically lets me survive on an amount of money that . . . well, if I told you I manage to make ends meet on about $8,000 a year, well . . . I guess that's the difference between Eugene and where you live. Or where most people live.

Anyway . . . publishing several different imprints gives us a better chance to be commercially successful. Basically, I think it's impolite, presumptuous, and financially unsound to expect readers and collectors to follow a certain imprint for more than four titles a year. By going with more imprints, and catering to different markets with each, we hope to sell to a larger audience overall . . .

CD: Okay, that should give people a pretty good idea of the philosophy behind the multi-imprint approach getting back to descriptions of the various imprints, how did the Arts Nova imprint come about?

AN: Again, that sort of happened because the Arts Nova books are books that we want to publish, but which don't fit any of the other imprints, and which we don't want to "foist" on anybody collecting any of the other imprints.

CD: I believe Arts Nova is going to be your "art book" line, right? And your first Arts Nova title is scheduled to be a short story/art portfolio by Alan Clark, entitled *The Pain Doctors of Suture Self*?

AN: Yes, we have the Clark book and some other miscellaneous art projects that we want to do. I'm checking the copyrights on some of the other stuff now. For instance . . . I'd like to do a collection of art from the "spicy detective" pulps. For the most part, though, I won't be making editorial decisions for the [Arts Nova] line; Jon Gustafson [who used to do an art column for *Pulphouse, The Hardback Magazine*] is going to be the editor for that line.

CD: As far as the other imprints go, is there a particular person who's "in charge" of the editorial decisions for each?

AN: Yeah. In general, Hypatia Press still pretty much remains my domain, and Silver Salamander is still pretty much John's domain. He's senior editor for the Darkside imprint, although I reserve the right to stick my foot in. He basically considers Voyager to be mine, but he can stick his foot in there, too. Special Editions Press, there's no one really responsible for that line, it's just whatever one of us wants to publish that happens to not fall into any other categories. The same with Paper Moon—John's picked a few, I've picked a few . . .

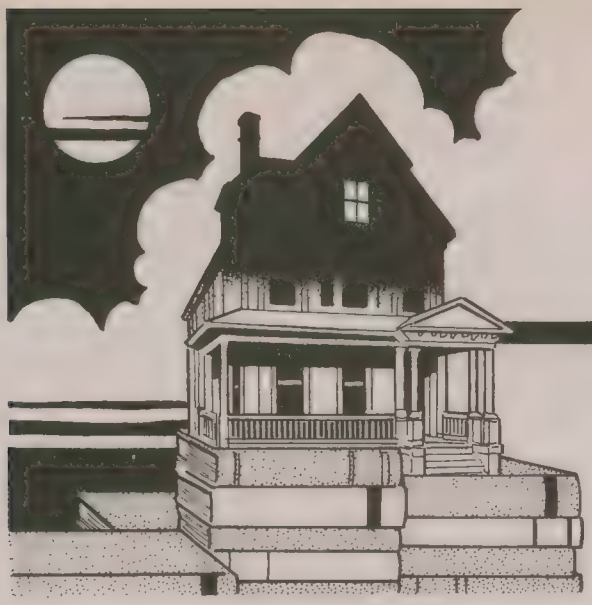
But in all cases, we have the liberty to question each other's choices. And Michael's in the middle, too; he has input on all this when he wants it.

CD: Do you plan on giving each imprint at least *x* number of books to see if it's going to succeed, or if you have a couple of stinkers, sales-wise, will you kill an imprint?

AN: No, I think we're pretty committed to the imprints. It's more likely that, if we get disappointing advance orders for a book, we'll just announce "hey folks, we goofed—we're not really going to publish 750 copies of this, but only 400." I don't think people will mind that, and it'll keep us from having too much cash tied up in inventory.

CD: You mentioned that the Internet played a role in helping to sell one of your earlier books. Do you now actively try to get word of your books on the net?

AN: Yes, we're in the process of investigating getting a Web page. And I understand that there are some commercial trading spots out there [on the net] where advertising is acceptable. As soon as I get these current books out the door, I plan to start spreading the word [on the net].



KATHRYN PTACEK

ANTHOLOGY ATTIC

The focus for this installment is mystery/suspense anthologies.

You know, when I first started this column I don't think there were but a handful of mystery anthologies Out There. However, over the years that number has grown (like a weed, I might add). I am surprised that I have a stack of mystery/suspense anthologies that I haven't reviewed yet, and a stack or two that I won't get around to reviewing (mostly because they're kind of old now).

And a lot of the mystery anthologies, like those in the horror field, are heading toward all-theme stories. There are good things about that, but also bad—sometimes when you read eighteen or twenty or more stories all based on one thing (whether it's horror about vampires or mysteries about canines) it gets a bit trying. Hey, wait. What about a cross-genre anthology of vampire mysteries . . .? Or . . . no, better not think about it.

Some of the mystery anthologies are going for a "holiday" tie-in now. There are a couple of Christmas ones, a Halloween one (I may review that in the next column), and then there's the following:

Crimes of the Heart (Carolyn G. Hart, editor; *Berkley*, 1995; 288 pages; $9; ISBN 0-425-14582-4). You could guess this book came out in time for Valentine's Day of this year—and you'd be right.

"Cupid's Arrow" by Dorothy Cannell is the story of Giselle, a slightly combative ten-year-old girl, and her Aunt Honoria who visit Thornton Hall, an Elizabethan house open to the public. They get caught up in the consequences of a love affair that happened hundreds of years ago; it's an enjoyable tale.

"The Rosewood Coffin; or, The Divine Sarah" by P. M. Carlson brings back Bridget Mooney, a Victorian actress who gets to know a lot of famous people in her somewhat-checkered career. This time she runs into Sarah Bernhardt and her husband. Bridget is no shrinking violet, however, and her stories are always fun to read.

Jeffrey Deaver's "Together" is a gritty tale of love and something more than that. I don't want to spoil it, so I won't say any more except read it.

Nancy Pickard's story "Valentine's Night" is a wry tale of love gone wrong—not just for one couple, but for two.

Other contributors include Barbara D'Amato, Susan Dunlap, Carolyn G. Hart, Joan Hess, Margaret Maron, Lia Matera, Sharyn McCrumb, D. R. Meredith, Audrey Peterson, Marilyn Wallace.

*

Another "holiday" volume:

Murder For Mother (Martin H. Greenberg, editor, *Signet*, 1994; 315 pages; $4.99; ISBN 0-451-18036-4).

As you might have guessed, *Murder For Mother* contains stories tied in some way to Mother, and came out around last Mother's Day, I believe. It's a combination original story/reprint volume, and among some of the writers you'll find in its pages are Wendi Lee, Billie Sue Mosiman, Rick Hautala, Ruth Rendell, and a reprint of that great story "Nine Sons" by Wendy Hornsby.

*

There were a couple of other books I planned to review this time around, but I'm running short of time. I'll keep them until next column.

Remember: Just because I don't review each story doesn't mean I disliked it. I don't have the space to mention each story, and so I try to hit the high points of the anthology.

Also, if you know of some anthologies out there that I haven't looked at, let me know. Fax me at (201)579-6441, e-mail me at K.PTACEK on GEnie, or write to me at PO Box 97, Newton NJ 07860. I don't promise that I'll get

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around to them, but you never know.

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Here are some anthologies you may have missed out on. Time and space consideration keep me from reviewing these books, but that doesn't mean you can't go out and find them. I still have tons of books under my bed that I haven't gotten around to reading (where did all these anthologies come from??).

Murder Most Merry: Six Christmas Mysteries (Editor not given; *Zebra Books*, 1994; 349 pages; $4.99; ISBN 0-8217-4763-0).

Women on the Edge (Sara Paretsky, editor; *Pinnacle*, 1992; 382 pages; $4.99; ISBN 0-7860-0044-9).

More Murder Most Cozy, More Mysteries in the Classic Tradition (Cynthia Manson, editor; *Signet*, 1993; 254 pages; $3.99; ISBN 0-451-17649-9).

A Woman's Eye (Sara Paretsky, editor; *Delacorte Press*, 1991; 448 pages; $19; ISBN 0-385-30000-X).

The Year's Finest Crime and Mystery Stories, 1st Annual Edition (The Staff of *Mystery Scene*, editors; *Carroll & Graf*, 343 pages; $21; ISBN 0-88184-903-0).

The Year's Best Mystery and Suspense Stories 1994 (Edward D. Hoch; *Walker & Co.*, 1994; 280 pages; $21.95; ISBN 0-8027-3192-0).

Women of Mystery II (Cynthia Manson, editor; *Carroll & Graf*, 1994; $21.95; ISBN 0-7867-0140-4).

Of note, although it's not an anthology, is *By A Woman's Hand*, a book edited by Jean Swanson and Dean James (*Berkley*, 1994; 254 pages; $10; ISBN 0-425-14143-8). This is directory of current women mystery writers; a less-than-a-page blurb bio is given for each, and in the back there's an index by series character, a geographic index, and an index by type of detective. It's a useful book to have on hand.

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Here are a few open markets for the writers among you:

The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror #9—c/o OMNI Magazine, 277 Park Ave., 4th Floor, NY NY 10172-0003; Casa Rincon, 11651 Calle Aurora, Tucson AZ 85748. Editors: Ellen Datlow (NY address), Terri Windling (AZ address). "This will include all material published in the year 1995. I am looking for stories from all branches of horror: from the traditional-supernatural to the borderline, including high-tech sf horror, psychological horror or anything else that might qualify. If in doubt, send it. This is a *reprint* anthology so I am only reading material published in or about to be published during the year 1995. Anything sent after [the] deadline will reach me too late to be considered for 1995. If a magazine you edit will becoming out by Dec. 31 1995 you can send me galleys so that I can judge the story in time. The sooner I get the material the better. There is a section in front of the book that covers 'the year in horror,' and 'the year in fantasy.' These include mention of magazines and publishing news concerning the horror and fantasy fields, novels we've read and liked, and in my section, 'odds and ends'—material that doesn't fit anywhere else but that I feel might interest the horror reader (like trading cards, strange non-fiction titles, art books, etc.). But I have to be aware of this material in order to mention it. When sending material to me please write Year's Best Horror on the envelope. [Terri] covers fantasy exclusively and I cover horror exclusively. If you consider something both, send to each of us. We do not confer about our choices." **Deadline:** *Dec. 15.*

❄

One note about something I mentioned in Anthology Attic #10. I had given you an update on *The Year's Best Horror*, edited by Karl Edward Wagner. He had contacted me saying that the series was very much alive and that he had a new contract in hand. I am sorry to report that since that column came out Karl died unexpectedly. Subsequently *DAW* cancelled *The Year's Best Horror*, and as far as I know, that series is gone forever. Karl's death is a huge loss to the field and to the many new writers he featured in his *Year's Best*; he was an excellent editor and writer, and a great person as well. Everyone in the field will miss him deeply.

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That's all for now. The next column will be on . . . something (maybe a look ahead at the books coming out next year? Or not). Keep reading.

THOMAS BOOKS

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DAVID NIALL WILSON is the author of over sixty published short stories and the soon-to-be-released vampire novel, *This Is My Blood* (Transylvania Press). The following tale of ghostly revenge is dripping with atmosphere and suspense.

Chadwick Forsythe was a man destined to perform great tasks, to lead men. But Fate, in her fickle way, seemed bent on preventing Chad's destiny—bent and malignant.

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In truth, Chad was somewhat to blame for the sour turn his life had taken—he had grown lazy, lowered his guard. A man walking the thin tightrope of the law can never afford such a lapse. On every side of his tightrope, predators prowled. They were swift to pounce when he blindly stumbled over their bait, eagerly taking it in his grasp.

Lucy, lovely young Lucy—Sampson had Delilah, Chadwick Forsythe had Lucy, and it looked as though Sampson had gotten the better deal. At least his walls had fallen in and ended the pain. Chad's walls were solid, unmoving, and they were eating away at his control, feeding his nervous hatred, giving him strength.

Chad had always been a leader. Men followed him blindly, automatically. Inside his stone cage, this power had not deserted him. Others, suffering as he, were nearby, and slowly, very slowly, he drew tight the reigns of control, drawing them under his power. Even here, in the very bowels of Hell, shamed and apparently defeated, Chadwick Forsythe worked, and planned, dreaming of revenge and freedom. He fervently hoped that the fact that he still lived occurred regularly to Lucy—regularly and ominously. He did not plan to die in San Valencez Prison, or anywhere, for some time to come.

His plans would soon begin to bear fruit. When everything was readied, when the time was right, his men, the damned and forgotten of San Valencez prison, the only army that Fate had left him, would follow him to freedom, freedom and sweet revenge. He'd slipped once, but then his hate had been incomplete, less than a driving force. Now there would be no error. They would be his, all of them, and they would all pay the price of their treachery.

San Valencez Prison was a hell-hole of the first degree. Those in debt, murderers, rapists, anyone spared death by the growing compassion of America's democratic judicial system, all were thrown together in her walls. Life was not considered a long sentence in San Valencez. If the dampness or the guards didn't kill a man, he would generally grow impatient and finish the job himself. Chad realized all of this, and so he planned. Escape was the only thought worth living for, the last anchor against despair. Chadwick Forsythe never lost sight of his goal, he would be free . . . who could gainsay him? 1908 was a year of great men, of great deeds—he would not be denied his rightful place in life.

"Traffic is a mess this morning in the aftermath of last night's storm, the worst, by the way, to hit San Valencez since 1908. Refuse and sewage, carried by flood water, have risen to litter the streets and sidewalks. Emergency crews have been clearing the debris since shortly after midnight, but things are moving slowly, so keep your eyes open.

Old timers here in San Valencez will remember that 1908 storm for the catastrophic tragedy at San Valencez Prison. Seventy-three men, attempting escape, died in the city drainage system.

The city water company reports a break in the water lines near 34th and Taft, traffic there is at a standstill. A fog has risen, formed from the meeting of the warm water and the cold air, and it has brought visibility down to almost nothing. Further reports as we get them here on KROK, your golden voice of the morning!"

Stones shifted, sliding aside at the insistent tug of the flood, shifting the bones beneath them and spreading them into the swiftly moving current—rushing them on through the drains. Where they tumbled, the waters turned frigid . . . .

They rose, undulating with the rolling of the mist, forming from the moisture-laden air, glistening and white, like storybook ghosts. Legion upon legion flowed up and solidified, ranks began to form and deploy, all in the eerie silence of the lifeless, all in the curtain of the mist.

A dog, pacing slowly down the walk, lowered its head and growled. The growl died to a whimper as white tendrils rose about him, dragging against the strength of his muscles with iced claws, slowing his movements to a crawl. Finally, as less and less air filtered in through the choking fog, as the blood froze in his veins and slowed to match his breath, the fire in the dog's eyes rolled to white, flickered, then died. The mist spread, the host grew, the silence reigned. Somewhere rose the lonely wail of an infant, perhaps born of an instinctive terror worn out of us by adulthood; all else was deathly quiet.

A pair of headlights, like huge, incandescent eyes, split the gloomy clouds. Rank upon rank of white forms parted, cut by the twin burning beams, only to reform at the rear of the vehicle as it passed, continuing their movements as though nothing had disturbed them. The city water truck, jets of steam puffing and gusting from its exhaust, chugged on steadily, unaffected by the myriad shapes shifting about it, surrounding it.

"Damn spooky out there, Matt," Glenn Fried said slowly. Glenn said everything slowly. He was a big man, almost ponderous in his bulk, and he did nothing with undue haste. He was not dull, as many thought him, only careful; all of his movements and decisions grew from precise deliberation.

At the moment, his eyes were not serving him as he wished. He caught glimpses, fleeting and unstable, of strange forms in the early morning air. Twice, he was certain that he had seen faces, marble-white and staring, flit against his windshield and scatter to the winds, but there had been no impact. With no logical answer in evidence, his careful mind was uncertain what to do with the apparent discrepancies his eyes were relaying to it. Glenn was suspicious of anything he could not "figure out," so he was nervous. "Damned spooky," he repeated, driving steadily on through the mist.

Matt Peterson was a very different sort from Glenn; perhaps that's why they were so close. The two had been friends since grade school, when they would share milk and Glenn's grandmother Lucy's sugar cookies on the front porch after school. Since then they had worked the same jobs, frequented the same bars, rooted for the Steelers together, even though they lived in California; they were as close as any brothers. Matt was thin, so thin that he bordered on emaciation. He wore his hair straight down over his collar in back; it was unkempt and often oily. He was nervous, like a ferret, eyes twitching all around him in insecurity. Glenn was his anchor, the one solid thing he could trust, and if Glenn said it was spooky, why, Matt was certain that it must be so. Glenn hardly ever kidded, and never at work.

Matt's eyes had also noted the flickering shapes, flitting and floating about them in the darkness. He had been ready to chalk them up to near-sightedness and last night's pint of Wild turkey, but that was before Glenn spoke. Shit, he thought. Out loud, he said, "Damned if I wouldn't think of goin' straight home and forgettin' this whole thing. Don't say nothin' in our contracts 'bout no ghost fogs, Glenn."

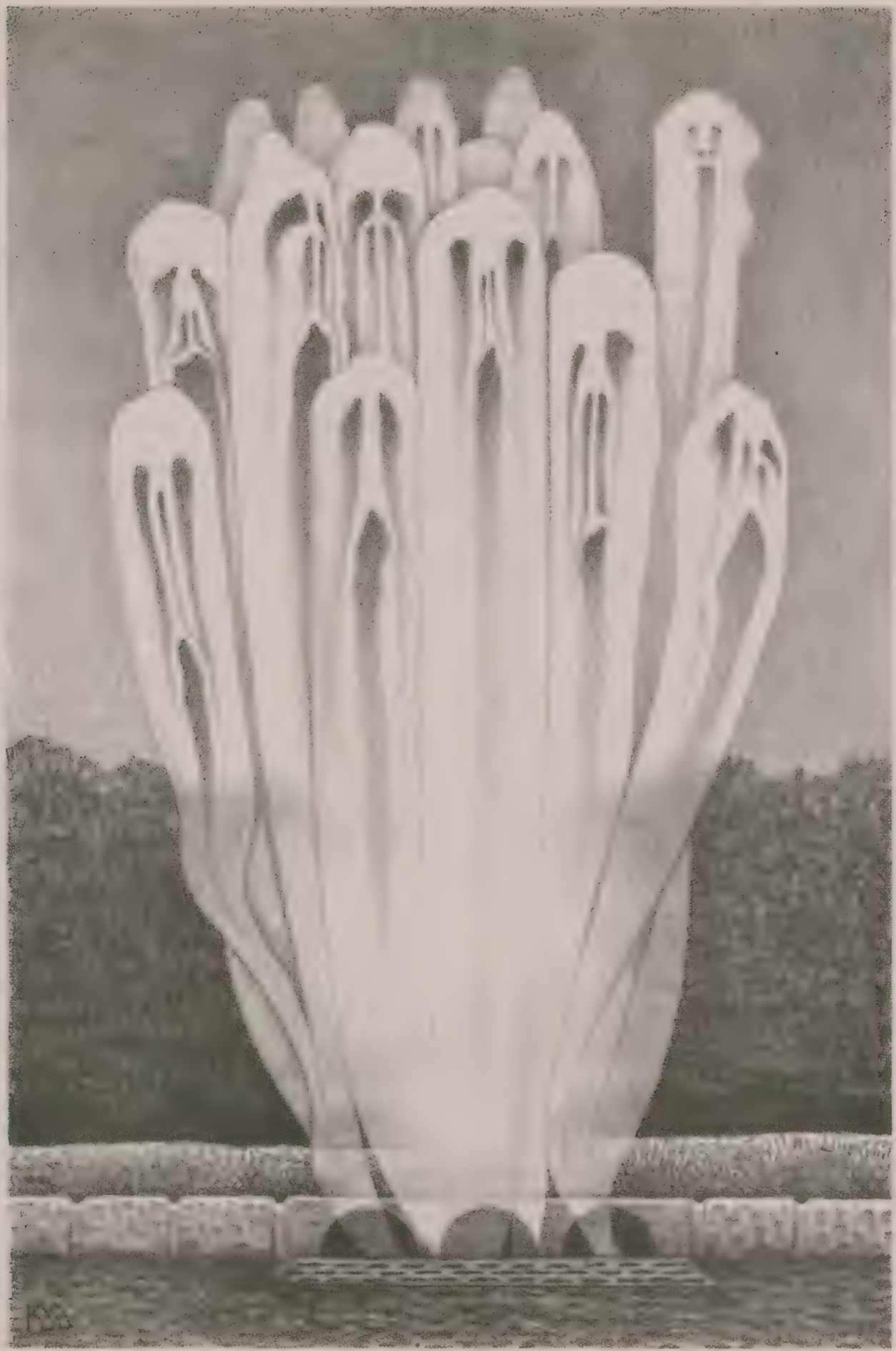
Glenn answered slowly, eyes on the road. "Now, Matt, you know we couldn't do that. What do you reckon ol' Bill would say if you told him we left a broken water line alone 'cause it was surrounded by a cloud of ghosts? Why, he'd say you was carryin' ol' Johnny Walker around at work with you again, and send us both down to the unemployment line, that's what. And what do you suppose Mable and the kids would say?"

Glenn was chuckling out loud, now, the mist being replaced in his thoughts by an image of Matt's fiery, Kentucky-born wife, chasing his partner into the street with her rolling pin, a not altogether uncommon sight. It was easier to drive with a familiar thought to fill his mind, something solid and normal. The fog rolled on, thick and glossy white in the headlight's glow.

Unseen by the two men, the air died around them. On a corner, back from the road and concealed from the cold on three sides by an alley and the side of Dan's Hardware, Gus Fleming lay, covered by a pile of newspapers from days gone by. Beside him lay his tattered bag, filled with memories—all that remained of a long, rough life. Dreaming, cramped, and cold, he smiled. "Homeless," he was fond of saying, "is not hopeless." Gus was not always comfortable, or fed, but he was usually happy. As he dreamed his unseen dreams, small wisps of white swirled around him, coating his still form like a light frosting of snow.

"What?" he muttered, as a slowly thickening tendril of mist grazed his neck. "Who's there?" He turned, stiff and groggy, pushing aside the paper with an irritated shrug. "I . . . "

Clouds had coalesced above his head, swirling into a closer knit, solid form. He turned his eyes up into the gaze of death. White bleached bones with blazing, golden eyes, the spirit smiled down at him. Gus tried to pull back, sliding crab-like backward over the cold ground. The phantom matched his pace—floating less than a foot from his face, and stringy white strips of fog reached forward, wrapping about his throat with clammy, sinuous coils. The specter seemed to widen its grin, and Gus' mouth flew open as well, the scream streaking from somewhere deep inside. It suffocated—so did Gus. Pale, icy fingers gripped his neck, glowing worms crawled through his open lips, sliding down through his throat and rapidly filling his lungs. His eyes bulged, his hands ripped—frenzied—at



the mist, but it only shredded around him and re-assembled as his arms passed through.

Moving on, the white form blended with its brethren, a slowly moving part of the tide. Unseen by anyone, Gus Fleming lay dead in the street. His skin, his hair, his eyes, even his tongue, which hung limply from the side of his mouth—all were glistening, frosty white.

San Valencez Prison had a dark reputation among the circles of men who operated near or beyond the confines of the law. In all of the seventy-nine years she had been standing, less than a dozen inmates had successfully escaped her grasp, only one of them was thought to be alive. These were unpleasant statistics to dwell on from a stone cage, especially when that cage was buried deep in the bowels of San Valencez herself. Chadwick Forsythe was painfully aware of the odds involved—aware, but not intimidated. After almost three months of observation and sly questioning, he had concluded that the hold of San Valencez had grown careless; it was supported largely by the psychological weight of her reputation. He had found nobody with enough self-confidence or drive to pull off an escape. Chad had enough of both, enough for himself, and for anyone who would follow him.

Hate, he discovered, could be an amazingly deep and versatile energy source. He learned that it could be channeled, molded and formed to meet his needs. He could cover his compassion, which surfaced rarely, he could bury his doubt, which he had almost forgotten the feel of, all in the depths of a cold, but fiery, river of pure hate. It gave him a feeling of immortality. Other inmates saw this in him, the crazy dance of light in the depths of his eyes, the aura of almost inhuman confidence in which he moved and spoke. There was no other hope available to latch onto; they would follow Chad to their deaths, if that was where it ended. Death was preferable to San Valencez, and would claim them soon enough, in any case.

Escape did not come easily, nor was the plan swift in either preparation or culmination. This was of little consequence to those involved. Time was the one thing that they were gifted, or cursed, with an abundance of. Time and Chadwick Forsythe were theirs, the world awaited. Sharky, The Penman, Bones Malloy, names on a roster of war, an army, men with a purpose and a leader. To fail, or to win, that was the game. To the caged and hopeless of San Valencez, any game with the price of freedom was worth the risk. Chad was their savior, and he reveled in the power this gave him.

If Chad was popular with the inmates of San Valencez, it was equally true that he was hated by the guards. He never seemed to quite accept the fact of their control, their superiority. No matter how many times they humiliated him, no matter how much they made him suffer, he still retained his cynical, maddeningly-smug grin. The light still danced in his eyes. Chad did not fear the guards, and they knew it. Strangely, this made them fear him, and the idea of it was more than their nerves could take. In desperation, they adopted the "Dungeon Renewal Plan."

San Valencez, being very old, was built along the lines of most ancient stone structures of her time. Her lower levels were catacombed with now-ruined cell blocks, torture chambers from an earlier era, and tunnels. The "Dungeon Renewal Plan" was developed in the slightly sadistic and devilishly clever mind of Bradley Hopkins, the Captain of the prison guards. Hopkins could not stand the sight of Chadwick Forsythe. The man caused breaks in his own iron control, in his realm, and it was intolerable. Hopkins was a prison guard because the idea of holding the lives of other men in his hands amused him. Forsythe did not have the attitude of a man who had surrendered control of his life, he smiled too much. So the plan was implemented—the prisoners, Forsythe among them, would begin to clean and renovate the lower levels.

The work was dirty, unhealthy, and down there they were out of Hopkins' sight. It was during this work detail that Chad discovered the drains.

The truck pulled to a quick stop on the corner of 34th St. and Taft Avenue. Here the fog was thickest, water flowing from the broken pile into the street adding to its bulk in the frigid air. The two sat for a few long moments, gazing into the mist, assessing the situation. Something, obviously, was not right. Line upon line of white shapes stood, like a military formation, on all sides of the gushing water. They were white, like statues of pearl, little flickers of light shimmering across their surfaces, borne magically about by the swirling tendrils of fog.

They had taken no notice as they passed a San Valencez police car, one block back, parked on the corner with its engine running. They knew that the police, just like themselves, worked their late hours.

In the squad car, slumped back oddly against the seat, a still figure sat and watched them pass—through dead eyes. The fog had slipped, like a breath of chill air, through the car's ventilation. Bob "Sparky" Brown had put up only small resistance. He'd been smoking a pipe, watching the mist roll over the town, and dreaming of Peggy, his wife, laying in wait for him to join her. She lay alone now, though Bob's patrol had ended an hour earlier. She was cranky, and a little cold—"Sparky" was colder.

It was swift. Eerie and final. As he daydreamed, as the white filled the streets, glowing in the fluorescent brilliance of the street lamps, he lit the bowl of Captain

Black and leaned back. When it was finished, he decided, he would go in. So what if he were a little early? Hell, the streets were dead, it was cold, who would say anything? Nobody, that's who. Then the smoke in front of his face changed.

It was a sudden change, it became a face. He started to speak, to question his vision, but fingers gripped his mouth, holding it wide, and the smoky fog crammed down his windpipe with sudden force that caught his breath and scattered it. He did not even have the air space inside to gasp. Pressing back against the seat, he fought with desperate strength, and lost. Sliding through him, pushing through the whitening skin at the back of his throat, the mist drifted out and slipped out the exhaust vent of the heater, coalescing to fill out in form, and moved to join ranks. In the distance, searching, a siren began to wail.

As Officer Bob watched in lifeless concentration, Matt was watching as well, his nervousness turning to terror as the apparitions formed and shifted about him. He turned to Glenn with pleading eyes.

"Jesus, Glenn," he almost whined, "you aren't goin' out there, are you? I mean, what the hell are they? They can't be human, can they?" The man's whole frame was shaking, and he was taut, like a strung bow.

"Now, Matt," Glenn said, trying to sound soothing through his own growing concern, "It's probably just one of those mirages, like we read about back in Miss Multinerry's class. You know, things that ain't really there, kind of reflected from the mist? We got to get that pipe fixed quick, or ol' Bill'll have our butts up to dry. You know that."

As if to punctuate his words, Glenn turned off the ignition key, and the sputtering of the engine faded into the deep folds of the silence surrounding them.

Faces began immediately to press forward, nearing the truck, but an unseen force seemed to suck them back, swirling them about until the two workers had a small space to stand in.

Moving quickly, unwilling to lose the small amount of courage that he had remaining, knowing it would have to carry both of them, Glenn opened his door and stepped out into the mist. He closed the door behind himself and moved to the truck's side, opening the sliding door behind which the tools were stored. Hesitantly, seeing the ghostly figures disperse harmlessly wherever his partner walked, Matt climbed out and joined him, chuckling nervously to hide his agitation.

"Can't let no ghosts stand in the way of the water company." He said this with a smile as thin as the air, still shaking. "Let's do this and get the hell out of here."

The two grabbed their bags, Glenn also bringing a section of pipe to use for a patch, and they turned, trying to ignore the apparitions around them. They walked hurriedly to where the water was still bubbling and flowing from the broken line.

It was a fairly large hole, almost circular in shape, and it looked as though it had burst outward from some internal pressure. Glenn stopped, staring at the rupture, his nervousness returning, magnified. What could make such a hole? It was as though a gun, large caliber, had been fired from inside the pipe! It defied logic, and Glenn could not accept it, so he stared, thinking hard, harder than he could ever remember thinking, trying to find an explanation for it—failing. His tool bag dropped from his sweating hand, landing with a dull thud on his boot and snapping him back to awareness.

In the face of insanity, Glenn did what many careful, steady people do under stress; he turned from what he couldn't explain to what he could, work. He reached for the patch he'd brought from the truck and, forcing a steadiness he could not feel into his hands, he turned to Matt, who had apparently overlooked the question of the hole's source in his simple way, and said, "Go down to the corner and shut off the valve, Matt. I'll start here when the water slows down."

Trusting his friend, and glad of any excuse to take his mind, and eyes, off of the white army all about them, Matt trotted off toward the corner of Taft Street, pipe wrench in hand. It was the last time that he would ever see his partner; the misty horde closed between them as rapidly as he moved away, forming a solid wall of white, grim-faced specters at his back.

Chad was very clear as to what he expected from those who followed him—obedience and discipline. Timing and surprise were essential if the plan were to work, he could afford no lapse in his control. Nobody complained. Chad spoke, things happened, time passed.

It was in the fifth month of the "Dungeon Renewal Plan" that Chad decided that the time was right. He'd considered all variables, all was perfect. The plan would work, of this he was certain. He, along with nearly seventy others, would escape. Now his plans turned outward, his mind traveled back. This was the hour to savor the aroma of revenge. He thought of Lucy, Lucy James, now Lucy Fried. She'd had the first laugh; he hoped that she had enjoyed herself. She would not enjoy the punch line of his own brand of humor.

He had been close, very close, to a deal that would have launched him into the circles of society where he knew that he belonged. He could have become an honest man, run for office, the possibilities had stretched endlessly. One trip to Mexico, one last load of laborers, bought on the American Dream, and sold on the reality that was its foundation, and he would

have been set. Then Lucy had come along, lovely and charming, and she had turned him in to the law. She'd claimed compassion as her support, had begged him not to go.

"They are people, Chad, not cattle," she had said, eyes alight. "You can't just sell them, no matter what the price!"

As it turned out, she had been right, but only because she herself prevented him. While Chad had fought a losing battle with the government, she had met Jonathan Fried, a carpenter, and had fallen in love. Chad went to San Valencez, Lucy went to the altar and became Mrs. Jonathan Fried.

Perhaps, he mused, she has forgotten, discarded their love like a bad dream. It mattered little, Chad had not forgotten—she would know that soon. He finished his plans and set them into motion, the superior smile on his face becoming more pronounced, more evil. Everything fell slowly into place.

The drains had been added as the city grew modern. The prison's lower levels, no longer suitable for other purposes, had been utilized in the renovation of the sewage and drainage systems.

It was one such drain that caught Chad's eye his first day in the "dungeons." It was large, almost the height of a man where it ran upright along the lower floors. The entrance was a grate, riveted solidly in place over a hole in the first level floor. It covered a drop off of about twelve feet into the next level, where it ran out and joined with the city drainage system—and freedom.

Of course, when the drain was first discovered, there had been the problem of the rivets, but Chad knew that for such a problem, sooner or later, there always arose a solution. The solution was handed to them, in the end, by the very guards who watched over them—hammers and chisels. Part of Hopkins' plan was to rework some of the old walls, which were crumbling and falling down, and to replace the old mortar and brick. Someday, he hoped, these spaces could be used to store supplies, or whatever was needed.

Given timely distractions for the guards, and a lot of luck, it proved no problem, one at a time, to remove the rivets from the grate, leaving it firmly in place, but not secured. Sometimes only one rivet would be cut in a week. Chad would allow no chances to be taken with their end in sight. Slowly they worked on the grate, and the dungeons began to become clean. This lulled the guards into a false sense of superiority, set them up for the fall to come. The plan unfolded like a red carpet to freedom. Chad's smile spread wider.

The evening of the escape arrived. In one hour, the "Dungeon Renewal" squad would be returned to their cells. One hour was all they needed. Chad thought for a long moment on the conceit that had left nearly seventy dangerous, hopeless men, armed with hammers, in the care of only five guards, all of whom were fat and lazy.

The rebellion was swift, violent, and silent. Five hammers rose, five heads caved in, and they were at the grate, Chad in the lead. Two swift blows broke loose the final rivets, and, hesitating only for a second, Chad dropped into the darkness, sticking almost ankle deep in the mulch at the bottom of the pipe.

He moved forward, drawing forth a candle, which he'd made, and lit it with a match from the one box they'd managed to obtain. The light flickered, then brightened, silhouetting his face in the damp air. Soon he was followed by the others, a light appearing every ten men. Without a word, Chad led them into the dank, eerie silence of the drains, shin deep in the sludge, smiling. They had a one hour start on all pursuit—nothing could stop them. Nothing, that is, that he could have been aware of. Far above them, in the night sky, a sky none of them had seen in months, or years, lightning flashed. The air rumbled with the ominous voice of thunder.

"City officials say your water will be back in short order, those of you in the 34th Street area. Workers have been dispatched to the scene to repair the break. Visibility is still poor in that neighborhood, but the fog should burn off by early morning. That's your emergency update from the golden voice of radio, KROK. Now, on to Elvis, and 'Jailhouse Rock.'"

The mist closed behind Matt, as Glenn watched him move off to shut down the water. Turning back to the job at hand, he lined his tools up on a concrete slab, high enough to keep them dry, and waited. He noted with concern that the surrounding figures seemed to be growing thicker, and whiter, and closer—but there was nothing he could do about it. The flow of the water, finally slowing, dropped off until it was nothing but a trickle. Working steadily, he removed the fragments of the broken section of pipe. He was careful not to cause further damage, but he worked quickly. He saved the section with the circular hole in it—he needed to get an explanation for it, somewhere, to restore his reason. He would take it to Bill, and they would find an answer. They had always done so before. As the last cut was made in the old pipe, he began to notice that it was becoming difficult to breathe.

The fog, closer yet about him, was an impenetrable wall of faces now, shifting faces, and one of them drifted free, floating down to face him with an evil glitter of triumph in its eyes, and a ghastly parody of a smile on its whitened lips. It would be only the grandson, Chad reflected, shimmering in the air and fighting to retain his form, to hold the fog for a few moments more, but it would be enough.

The storm washed over the walls of San Valencez Prison as the search began. Men with lights were lowered through the grate into the lower levels, but they were forced to return quickly. The rain was falling in great torrents, and the level of water in the drains was rising at an alarming rate. Deep in the bowels of the city, Chad and his men were fighting for their lives, and for their breath. It was seven in the evening when they were finally overcome, the water filling their lungs, forcing the last of their air to rush for the freedom they were denied, a trail of bubbles—scream-filled.

Lucy Fried, reading of Chad's death the next day, wept. Chad did not hear her; he was alive only in the force of his dying scream, far below the city, alive in the depths of an inhuman rage. As the rushing waters swept beneath the city, debris tumbled over the remains, burying them in slime and sewage.

Shaking his head and ripping his eyes from the ghost, skin clammy with sweat and the air growing very heavy in his lungs, Glenn muttered under his breath, "Where's Matt?" He thought, just for a moment, that he heard someone call his name, far, far away, but it was not repeated, and he told himself that his mind was playing tricks on him. He worked on, faster than before, the face of Chadwick Forsythe watching in silent malevolence. The air became sticky in his throat, his eyes watered, and his lungs burned. Somehow, concentrating on the job before him was slipping from the realms of possibility. He felt the draw of dead eyes, boring through his consciousness. The pipe, the wrench, and his self control, fell from his grip as one. The specter closed the gap between them quickly, the ice-fire in his eyes intensifying.

Scraping against the roughening surface of the air, scratchy, ancient vocal chords forced themselves into solidity—sound struggled forth. "Fried!" The words hissed like escaping steam, "Finally—so long—finally you are mine. I've missed your grandmother, Fried, she slipped away . . . . "

Glenn could not speak in answer, his own lungs felt as though they were filled with sponge, his face was rapidly draining of color, rushing to match the white of his assailant. He spoke instead with his eyes—they spoke the language of terror.

"Cold, Fried," the voice croaked forth as the specter's bone-like claws gripped him firmly by his shoulders, drawing him nearer. "It was so cold. You will see, Fried, we will go together . . . we will both be cold."

The water at their feet had long since ceased to flow. Matt had seen to that. The wall of white forms was dwindling rapidly, closing tighter and more solidly about the small area where Glenn knelt, tightly held by his fate—the inheritance of ancient hate. Each rank disappeared as it reached them, receding into the pipe, as though being sucked into the tube of a vacuum cleaner. Finally, nothing remained but the form of Chadwick Forsythe, and Glenn—hope sprang like a comet to his eyes as the ghost began to follow the others into the darkness of the pipe.

Hope, as it so often does, melted instantly into the sticky, clinging morass of insanity. With inhuman force, and a purpose all-too-clear, the ghost figure began dragging Glenn downward, hauling him into the pipe. It was not possible, a form as large as his entering a foot-in-diameter pipe, not reasonable. Here, reason fled, and logic cowered. Head first, the pressure scraping and peeling the skin back from his bones, crushing the bones themselves to sticky, goopy, sludge—hands clawing for purchase, though beyond the control of his ruined mind, Glenn was dragged into the abyss. It was quick, sickeningly quick, and, sustained on the half-life of his captor's hatred, Glenn lived—what remained of him.

The tunnels, and the darkness, beckoned.

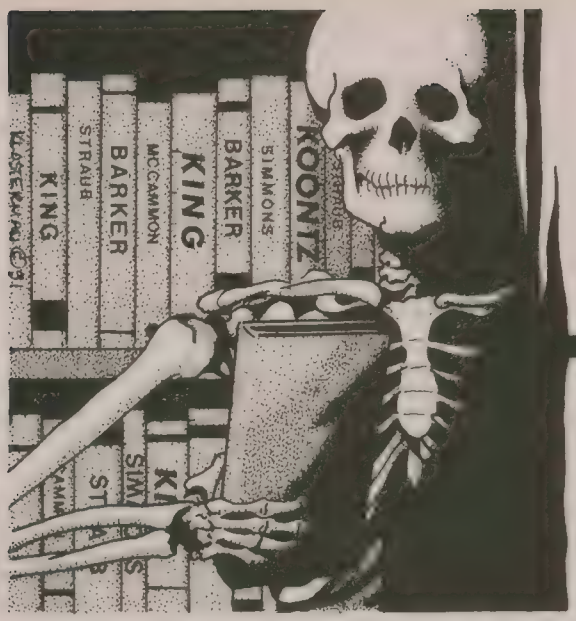
Above, in the streets, cars were beginning to arrive. The mist had cleared. Their hearts, those who ventured forth, chilled to ice as a cry arose, a cry that tore through broken lips, ripped through a ruined throat, the cry of terror passing back to the darkness that spawned it. It rang with the icy tones of pain, warped by insane retribution—fangs of vengeance ripping forth the meat they craved. All but one heard the cry, none forgot—none but one.

Matt sat, legs crossed, staring at the now enlarged break in the pipe. His lips quivered, his eyes were blank. "Glenn!" he gasped, beginning to sway back and forth. Small bits of flesh, trails of intestines, strips of skin, all were present on the ragged edges of the pipe, but he could not correlate these with Glenn—not in any way that allowed for sanity, and he had so precious little left. "Glenn," he repeated, "Glenn . . . "

In the others, the scream receded toward memory; in their hearts, the chill melted under the mellow touch of the rising sun. A thin thread of ice tied off the flow of blood to Matt's brain; it slowly ceased to function. The other end of the thread wound down, down into the cold. Wind, like a cry of heartache, sighed through the branches of his thoughts, calling to him. The mists began to cobweb his brain, he saw words, hanging trapped for eternity, woven into the fog—but not really words—no, only laughter. He joined it, nothing else remained, and the mist began to spread to his throat, replacing the air.

"I'm coming, Glenn," he croaked, "I'm coming."

— CD



TYSON BLUE

NEEDFUL KINGS & OTHER THINGS

(Editor's note: Due to my illness and the resulting publication delay, this column was written for an older issue and, at my request, was not updated. The next column will include all updated information.)

I'd like to take a moment before we begin this issue's column to say a few words about the passing of Robert Bloch — although he will have been gone for many months by the time you read this, as I write, it's been only a little over a week.

I remember the first time I heard about Robert Bloch. I was a kid, visiting in Alabama one summer, and one of my friends described *Psycho* to me in vivid detail — he was talking about the novel, not the film. I don't recall for sure what the first Bloch novel I read was — it may have been *Firebug*, or *The Scarf* — but I do remember his classic short story, "Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper," which I read in one of the fine Alfred Hitchcock juvenile collections I stocked up on in my youth. I was drawn in by the prose, set in the commonplace, everyday world, which suddenly flipped itself around and turned into a very dark, very scary place.

And there was also a wry, self-effacing humor to Bloch's work, which showed itself in rare form in his recent "unauthorized autobiography," *Once Around the Bloch*, a signed copy of which is one of the prides and joys of my library.

I'm not the only one who took that journey over the years — and Bloch's career spanned virtually the history of the genre — Ray Bradbury, Stephen King and a host of others took joy and inspiration from his work. His influence was immeasurable, and he will be deeply missed.

Insomnia has been heralded as Stephen King's return to the brand of contemporary horror which made him famous, following the more experimental, and less successful, forays he made with *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*. It isn't, but that doesn't make it a bad book.

Indeed, this is King's most readable novel in quite some time — I went through its 800 or so pages in record time, even faster than the two much smaller novels which preceded it, as well as the similarly-sized *Nightmares and Dreamscapes* last year.

A conscious effort was made to keep the novel's plot under wraps, down to the book's hideous red-and-white cover design, which Viking press releases described as "innovative" (read: it looked like *Disclosure*, only it sucked), and which is easily the worst cover ever on a King novel. There is, to give credit where it's due, a nice color photo of the author by Jim Leonard on the back, and it even bears on the novel's plot.

What's the book about? Well, in a way it's about fate, about tampering with fate, with gaining things, losing things — sleep among them — about Kirlian auras, little bald doctors, the abortion rights crusade, domestic violence, the plight of the aged, to name but a few.

It is also the story of Ralph Roberts, an elderly resident of the town of Derry, Maine, last visited in King's novel *IT*. Now, years later, the town has recovered from having its downtown fall into a hole in the ground, but it has new problems. Shortly after the death of his wife, Ralph has trouble falling asleep at night. As the days go by, the problem gets worse and worse.

At the same time, Ralph's neighbor, Ed Deepneau, begins acting a little strange, which climaxes when he beats the daylights out of his wife for signing a petition urging feminist activist Susan Day to come to speak at Derry in sup-

port of an abortion clinic. This is but the beginning of a rising tide of increasingly violent activity around the Day appearance which culminates in an act of terrorism which will have consequences that no one in Derry can even imagine.

Through means which I'll leave you to discover for yourself, Ralph finds himself drawn into a battle between forces of good and evil which manages to tie in elements of a number of King novels, including *Pet Sematary* and the *Dark Tower* novels.

I would classify this as a fantasy novel rather than a horror novel. Like most good fantasies, there are horrific elements, but the overall tone is fantastic. Like *Needful Things*, the novel starts off slowly, building to a climax in its final third.

Along the way, however, there is plenty going on to keep readers turning the pages. The conflict between the citizens of Derry on either side of the abortion issue is more than lively enough to keep our attention. And if that isn't enough, there is the wonderfully-handled romance between Ralph and Lois, a neighbor, as well as his relations with his friends. King demonstrates a feel for what it's like to be old which nearly rivals his feel for childhood as demonstrated in his earlier novels.

The theme of being invisible as a metaphor for old age is one which recurs throughout the novel, both figuratively and literally — but that's something you'll have to find out for yourself.

In conclusion, *Insomnia* is a novel which marks new territory for King in a number of ways, exploring aspects of life seldom touched upon by him in the past (with such notable exceptions as "The Reach" and *Dolores Claiborne);* like his last few novels, King is experimenting with new types of storytelling, with results which are likely to appeal more to his mainstream readership.

And at the same time, this is a novel whose contemporary subtext explores a number of issues relevant to the real world — the elderly, abortion rights, domestic violence, all issues of great concern to King and his wife Tabitha — and becoming more so every day. These issues both anchor the novel's fantastic elements in the real world, lending them verisimilitude, and at the same time give readers something else to think about beyond the main line of the story.

This is bound to be a controversial novel for King and his readers, but it is one which is certain to be enjoyed by most of them.

The novel is also available in an unabridged audio edition in the $80.00 range from Penguin HighBridge audio. The novel is read by Eli Wallach, not by King as had been reported elsewhere, and he does a fine job of conveying the older point of view of Ralph Roberts. The reading is basically unadorned, with only a little incidental music to let you know when the end of the tape is coming up. The novel takes 28 hours to listen to completely, so your commute will be livelier for quite some time.

And if that's not enough for your King-ly audio fix, the third and final volume of the unabridged audio *Nightmares & Dreamscapes* is also available for $29.95 from Penguin HighBridge. This contains all of the stories not contained in the first two volumes, along with King's notes, read by King himself. Readers this time include King himself (reading "It Grows On You" and his notes), Grace Slick (reading "Helluva Band"), many more. The production values are similar to those for the *Insomnia* audio, and both are well worth your time, as is a newly-produced PenguinHighBridge selection of stories from *Skeleton Crew*, including "The Monkey," read by Matthew Broderick, and "Gramma," which reading is not quite as good as Gale Garnet's rendition on the long out-of-print Warner Audio edition of the mid-'80's.

King has done a number of unusual things to promote *Insomnia*, including writing a brief letter plugging the novel for members of Waldenbooks' Preferred Reader club, a copy of which was sent to all the club members along with their discount coupons late this summer.

But perhaps the most unusal move, and the most welcome to fans, was King's decision to hop on his Harley and head off across country on a promotional tour, stopping in ten cities along the way from Bangor to California. In each place, King would stop off at an independent bookstore (this was billed on rock-tour styled promo T-shirts as the "Independent's Day" Tour) where he would pre-sign 200 or so copies of *Insomnia* to be disposed of in any way the store saw fit, followed by a press conference and a reading at some large local venue.

I caught up with King on his second stop of the tour, October 6, at the Campus Bookstore at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. King began his stint following signing chores at the store with

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a press conference at the suitably Victorian Gothic A.D. White House on the Cornell campus. A transcript of that conference, as well as the Q & A from that evening's lecture follows this column.

King concluded his official doings at Cornell with a lecture that evening at the Alberding Field House. Before an eager crowd of 5,000 customers — who got in free! — King spoke for 30 minutes about the plight of independent bookstores, who are taking a beating from the chains and the large price-chopper outlets like Wal-Mart, Sam's Club, Target, etc., at the cost of the midlist authors and local interest books carried by smaller stores. This was followed by a 30-minute selection from *Insomnia*, followed by 30 minutes of questions and answers from the crowd. A couple of photos from the day should be scattered around this column.

The lecture and conference proved to be fairly revelatory, particularly regarding King's plans to write all four of the remaining *Dark Tower* novels next summer for periodic release in the future. He was cagier about his next novel, however, refusing to answer questions about it.

The "Kingwatch" network was fairly active during King's tour, and articles and even a few personal accounts of experiences of readers meeting King were sent in by the following: Louise Dragon, Harmony, ME; Charles Powell, Hinsdale, NH; Sheri L. Yeager, Dearborn, MI; Emmanouil Paris, Alliance, OH; Wiilo May, Northville, MI; Beverly Vincent of The Woodlands, TX; and Julie Beam of Hutchinson, KS.

King also had a short story, "The Man in the Black Suit," in the October 31, 1994, issue of **The New Yorker**, which, as you may recall, served as a home for the non-fiction essay "Head Down" a few years back. This is a reminiscence of an old man living in the vicinity of Castle Rock, looking back on a scary encounter he had as a boy with a mysterious man in black. The story has a nice allegorical feel to it, and the terror is understated, as befits the uptown venue in which it appears. If you missed it, libraries should have a copy on file.

Kingwatcher Michael D. Toman of Torrance, CA, sent along an article from the October 9, 1994, edition of the **Washington Post Book World**, about the final issue of a literary magazine named **Antaeus**, which apparently features something by King. I have never heard of the magazine and knew nothing about the King story, but will let you know as soon as I find out anything. You might write Daniel Halpern, the magazine editor, at Ecco Press, 100 West Broad St., Hopewell, NJ 08525, for information.

Those of you who want to take a look at the lighter side of King will not want to miss *Mid-Life Confidential: The Rock Bottom Remainders Tour America With Three Chords and an Attitude*, a nifty little volume from Viking which chronicles the life and times of America's premier all-author rock band (well, all authors and three "ringers", including rock legend Al Kooper).

King takes his turn at describing what it's like to be a writer, a member of a solitary profession, suddenly thrown together with a bunch of similar people all obsessed with suddenly becoming a good band and living out the adolescent fantasy of every American teenager from 14 to 40 and beyond. Also along for the ride are Roy Blount, Jr., Robert Fulghum, Dave Barry, Matt Groening, Griel Marcus, Tabitha King (who also contributes all of the photos, many in color, throughout the book), Amy Tan, Tad Bartimus, and many more.

Although not a horror novel, this is sure to be a volume any true King fan will want on his bookshelf. And once you've finished reading it, you'll never separate the words "Acuff-Rose" and "assholes" in your mind again. Trust me, it'll make sense later . . .

And speaking of passing things along, don't forget to take part in my nifty new club, the King-Watchers of the World.

Kingwatch goes international this go-round, with the arrival of two items from Debra Ash (or Dash, as she signs herself), of Surbiton, Surrey, England, who

passed along a positive review of "Needful Things," the film, which **Empire** magazine liked better than the book (a film critic who reads novels! What *will* they think of next!?), followed by an article from **RadioTimes**, a sort of television listing guide, reviewing the upcoming BBC broadcast of "IT." Sorry, no ordering info on either of these, but it's nice to see what they're saying about King on other countries.

Meanwhile, back in USSA *(not* a typo, but a Beatles joke!), Linda Healy of South Sioux City, Nebraska, checks in with a USA book article about popular YA author R.L. Stine, which compares him with King in terms of popularity and prolificity. The piece appeared on December 2, 1993.

Sheri Yeager, self-styled "Stephen King Fanatic" (it's printed on her address labels) sends in **USA Weekend** from August 5-7, 1994, which contains a "factoid" about the origins of the GI Joe character Crystal Ball. Although it says that the character was a favorite of King's son Owen, my memory from an old **Castle Rock** story is that he also created him, with King writing the bio card.

Brian DeLeon of Claremont, CA, provides us with the dedication page to Lawrence Block's new book, **The Man Who Traded Ted Williams**. The book is dedicated to King, who wrote the intro for the recent Dark Harvest edition of Block's first Matthew Scudder mystery, *The Sins of the Fathers*.

Susan Cogdell of Spartanburg, SC, passes along the July 1994 issue of **Locus**, which contains a small blurb announcing King's *Insomnia* tour (for a little about King's Ithaca, NY, stop, see this column and a longer feature elsewhere in this issue).

Wendy Wright of Escondido, CA, contributed the "Points To Ponder" column from the July, 1994, issue of **Reader's Digest**, containing a quote from King likening writing to archaeology.

Stephen D. Hawkins of Maineville, OH, sent in the Dave Barry column dealing with the Remainders mentioned earlier, from the July 10, 1994 issue of the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. I know it's a duplicate mention, but . . . the paper came out on my birthday, and, well . . .

Sheri L. Yeager, self-styled "Stephen King Fanatic" (remember her?) sends in a *Detroit Free Press* article from September 18, 1994, about a family torn apart by tragedy and injustice, who feel their life is like a storybook "with a Steven (sic) King ending."

Steve Hawkins signs back in from Ohio with a "Far Side" cartoon featuring "monster refrigerators," with a note stuck on reminding the monster to have "lunch at Stephen King's." Jack and Judy Moore of Austin, TX, clipped the same panel for us.

Jan Goodman of Flint, MI, really dug deep to find a cartoon in **The Air Conditioning, Heating and Refrigeration News**, a trade paper, where a man is moaning about the terrifying book he's reading. "Stephen King novel?" his wife asks. "No, OSHA and EPA Regulations!" he explains.

Cynthia Lemke of New Caney, TX, sent in a letter about another shop named "Needful Things," which she ran across while passing through Tomball, Texas. She promises to check this place out, but if any of you folks are through there, give it a looksee, take a photo, send it in, etc.

I saw a note in the Rochester, NY, **Democrat & Chronicle** about the Kings' having placed an advertisement in the **Bangor Daily News** asking trick-or-treaters not to come by this year. Janet Winkler of Chesterland, OH, sent in a similar clipping from the **Cleveland Plain Dealer** for November 1, 1994.

One of our original King-watchers, Louise Dragon, proves as sharp-eyed as ever, passing along a favorable review of *Insomnia* from the **Morning Sentinel**, a paper located somewhere near her Harmony, ME, home.

Willo Jean May of Northville, MI, sent us a cartoon from the October 28, 1994, **Detroit News**, advertising "Bedhead," showing a bathrobed figure with a bad case of pillow hair, with reviews of horror from noted horror crafters, including King, whose mock-review is "Mommy!!"

Jim Colson of Columbus, OH, reads video mail-order catalogues too closely. He sent in a page from the current **Critic's Choice** video catalogue, featuring "King of the Forest," an adventure about forest ranger Steve King. Since the 1946 film came out a year before King's birth, it's doubtful he had a hand in it, but what if King's **dad** saw it while thinking of names for his child to be . . .

Sheri L. Yeager of Dearborn, MI — **her again!!** — scrounged up the "Toward More Picturesque Speech" column from the November, 1994, **Reader's Digest**, which suggests a "literary dinner" of Stephen a la King, Spuds Terkel, with Truman Compote with Robert Frosting for dessert. I don't make 'em up, I jus' passes 'em along . . .

Perhaps our weirdest offering to date comes from Jorgen Sjoberg of Grass Valley, CA, who passed along a mail solicitation for a virtual-reality sex program which tried to give itself an air of legitimacy by saying that King made virtual reality the subject of his "best-selling book-turned-blockbuster movie, 'The Lawnmower Man.'" These folks really know their King. Nice picture with the ad, though . . .

Mark Davis, of Romulus, MI, contributes the August 13, 1994, issue of **TV Guide**, whose article on the secret vices of the stars includes King's confession that he likes old shows like "The Beverly Hillbillies"

and the video movie "Prisoner Cell Block H," which is, he admits, not very good, "but I've always been a sucker for women in chains."

So don't just sit there — join in the fun! No entry fee, no badges, no newsletter. What you do to join is to spot a news item about Stephen King in a magazine, newspaper, TV show, anything. Send us a photocopy of the **entire article and the cover of the publication,** and send it to:

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If you send an item we use, you'll get your name in this column. Submissions cannot be returned, and please don't send in articles from **Entertainment Weekly** — I read that regularly. Please note the new address this time around.

One thing you guys always tell me you want more of is Tabitha King news. Well, this time I can oblige. Not only does Mrs. King contribute all of the photos and one essay to the aforementioned *Mid-Life Confidential*, she also has a new novel out.

The Book of Reuben is a prequel, of sorts, to King's two previous Nodd's Ridge novels, *Pearl* and *One On One*. This novel takes Reuben Styles, the husband of Pearl and the father of *One On One*'s Sam, from his late teens up to the beginning of *Pearl*. Along the way, we meet Sam's mother, who is one the worst queen-hell bitches in the history of modern literature, and a host of other brilliantly-drawn characters, all acting against both the poverty-stricken backdrop of the Nodd's Ridge area and the turbulent landscape of the Vietnam War era.

I've gone on and on the past about how King lets readers learn a little more about Nodd's Ridge with each novel, the same way you learn about a new town you move to by expanding your circle of friends, and the same is true this time. This is not quite as triumphant a piece of work as *One On One*, but it is definitely one you don't want to miss.

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TRANSCRIPT OF STEPHEN KING'S Q & A SESSIONS

CORNELL UNIVERSITY, ITHACA, NEW YORK

Transcribed by Tyson Blue

INTRODUCTION: We have been striving mightily to bring you an in-depth interview with Stephen King in these pages during this, the year of the twentieth anniversary of the publication of *Carrie*. However, King's busy schedule being what it is, that has simply not been possible. So, what we have done here is the next best thing — I attended King's press conference and lecture at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, during his recent cross-country tour to promote both the plight of independent bookstores and his own *Insomnia*.

What follows is the text of both King's midafternoon press conference at the university's A.D. White House, a suitably Gothic Victorian mansion, as well as the Q & A portion of King's lecture that evening at the Alberding Field House, before an appreciative audience of 5,000 or so. Along with this are a selection of photos taken during both appearances. Such editing as has been done has been done only to eliminate repetitious questions except where they would make a point.

PRESS CONFERENCE:

SK: (Aside) No, I'm not going to make a statement.

I'm Steve King, and I'm here to talk tonight about independent bookstores, and just coincidentally, I have a book which is on the market, *Insomnia*, so there might be a little bit of promotion involved in this. But the major reason that I came out on the road this time was that Viking offered me a chance to come and talk on behalf of some independent booksellers, and suggested that I could sign, flat sign, autograph books that would bring foot traffic into independent bookstores where, hopefully, customers would see a diversity of material, and they would be able to sense that there's a wider range in terms of the stuff that's being offered than there are in the chain stores and particularly in the price-cutter clubs.

I'm concerned about the effect that the price-cutters are having on American popular culture, and God knows American popular culture is debased enough without giving too much economic power to — I am making a statement, actually — without giving too much economic power to mega-stores that want to reduce cultural diversity to 25 fiction titles, 25 non-fiction titles, and 100 record albums, most of which are by the Beastie Boys.

(laughter)

So, if you have any questions for me, I will dodge them as well as I can.

Q: At one point, you said that you'd decided to shelve *Insomnia*, and then you went back to it later. Could you tell us something about that?

SK: Well, what happened is, there are a lot of characters in *Insomnia*, but one is a research chemist named Ed Deepneau, and I'm going to read a section that has a lot to do with Ed tonight. In the first draft of the book, Ed drove off to take a vacation on the coast of Maine on page 40, and when that happened, I kinda said to myself, "Oh shit, he's driving away with my book!"

But I didn't know what to do about it, because I have a very archaeological view of writing, I don't — people always ask me "where do you get your ideas?" Well, I don't actually get them, I find them. The books are like objects that I dig up out of the ground, and the characters do pretty much what they want to do. I let them scurry wherever they wanna scurry, and Ed just sorta scurried away, and I thought "Shit, that's not fair!" But he was gone.

So I put the book away — well, actually, I finished it, and then I came back and looked at it after I got some perspective, and I was able to see where I'd gone wrong and bring Ed back to town where he belonged and that solved the problem.

Q: Following the success of "The Stand," can you tell us a little bit about "The Langoliers?" I read a little item about it in **Fango**.

SK: When this gentleman speaks about **Fango**, he's talking about one of our trade magazines, **Fangoria**, which covers the real screen classics, like "Basket Case", "Texas Chainsaw Massacre III" and that sort of thing.

Anyway, "The Stand" was an eight-hour miniseries on ABC, and I was involved — I wrote it, and co-produced it with Richard Rubinstein. "Langoliers" is also done

by Richard, but I wasn't involved in any hands-on way with the script. But I did a little acting piece in it — well, some people call that acting, and other people call that "just being on film," but I did it, anyway. It's gonna be a four-hour miniseries on ABC. I haven't seen a rough cut yet, so I can't tell you how good or how bad it is, but the script was strong. Tom Holland, who directed it, did "Child's Play" and "Fright Night" — he's a good director, he's got some working brain cells left, and that's always encouraging, particularly when you get to the TV market.

But I think it's going to be good. It's got a cast of total unknowns, and that's also sort of encouraging, at least it's not the usual "starring David Hasselhoff" (laughter) "A miniseries starring David Hasselhoff and Tori Spelling," that's when you know it's really gonna be bad.

Q: So many of your books have been made into movies —

SK: So many, so many . . .

Q: Do you ever write your novels with an eye to how they'd look on the screen?

SK: No, it never occurs to me. I never sit down and write a passage and think, "Heh, heh, how will they do that on film?" Because it's a — I really love to go to the movies. And when somebody makes a movie out of one my stories I love to go to that because the first time they usually let me go for free. They have to, just about — it's my story! But I never think about who's gonna be in it, or think about what the special effects problems would be, and I think one of the reasons that a lot of them have been made into movies is that it never crossed my mind to be interested in whether or not they would. Most of them have been, I've been very fortunate that way. But I think it has a lot to do with the fact that I grew up in a movie culture; I always loved them. I probably don't go to as many as I used to, and the ones that I do see — I don't know, I think it's a function of getting older, and Hollywood is always full of emotionally retarded people.

Anyway, there's been no interest in *Insomnia*, there are a couple of problems for Hollywood with it. For one thing, it's about old people. The other one is that it's about the abortion issue. And nobody likes either of those things. Actually, Hollywood movies about old people have traditionally done pretty well, but maybe eventually somebody will pick it up.

In the meantime, there's "Langoliers" and "Shawshank," which is out now. I think it starts around here this week, and that's a wonderful film. And there's a picture at Christmas called "Dolores Claiborne."

Q: How long will we have to wait to find out how events at the end of *Insomnia* tie in to the *Dark Tower* series?

SK: Not very long. I have a book that I — I couldn't believe it, Emily from the bookstore told me that there were going to be five thousand people there tonight, and I'm saying to myself, "Every one of them's gonna raise their hand during the question-and-answer period and say, 'When's *The Dark Tower* going to go on?'"

I feel like Conan Doyle after he pushed Sherlock Holmes over Reichenbach Falls about that. But what I was, I committed to Viking for three books, and *Insomnia* is the first, the second is done. I have one book that I'd like to write, but not just for Viking, that's just an excuse — I want to write because I think it's really a kick-ass idea. And I want to do it for that reason. And when that's done, then I'll go back to Roland — Roland the Headless Thompson-Gunner, little rock 'n'roll reference there . . .

Q: Why do you think your work is so popular when so many people are afraid to read it?

SK: Well, the ones that are frightened to read it are basically wimps! (explosive laughter) I don't know why I'm so popular! It's — I'm even uncomfortable saying that I am popular, although I am, just because it makes me a little bit uncomfortable to be up here in front of all you people. You should be up here to listen to what some politician has to say, or somebody who is writing at a level that's a different one from what I am.

I've connected with people on some level. I get fan mail from people who feel that their lives have been touched somehow by what I write or say, and I have no idea why. I'm writing mostly because I love to do it and because I love to make up stories.

Q: Having classified Hollywood as emotionally retarded, what's your favorite film adaptation of your work?

SK: "Shawshank Redemption" is the best. No question about it. In fact there's not anything else that's even close to it. Although I've been lucky. Look, when I sell things to the movies, like, around Christmastime, kids can go into a store and there'll be a bag full of, oh, a grabbag; you grab something out, and it's wrapped up in a brown bag and you can't see what you're getting. Most of the prizes aren't very good, but every now and then one is.

For me, that's like Hollywood. "Shawshank" is a good one; "Misery" was a pretty good one; "Stand By Me" was a really good film adaptation, I just really liked—I loved that a lot. And "Shawshank" has a lot of that same feel to it.

And I thought that "IT" on TV was very decent, and I'm delighted that "The Stand" turned out the way that it did. I got involved with "The Stand" because it was the one that the fans wanted to see, and in the same breath, you'd get this "Please do this" and then "Don't ever do this," because there was this feeling that the film version could never live up to whatever it was, whatever kind of emotional charge they took out of the novel. And when people tell me I can't do a thing, I want to do it.

I'm crazy to be doing this tour on a motorcycle, and I didn't do it because it was Viking's idea, it was my idea. It seemed like a great idea in July; it didn't seem so hot yesterday, when it got down around forty or something like that. But basically, there are ones that I like, and there are ones that I don't like.

The worst thing that's happened as a result of the movies is sequelmania. There've been two sequels to "Children of the Corn," which was a bad movie to start with. "Children of the Corn II: The Harvest," and "Children of the Corn III: The Creaming." (laughter) I'm just kidding about that! I don't remember what "Children of the Corn III" was, but there was one. "Pet Sematary Two," "Children of the Corn III," "Children of the Corn" wins; "Lawnmower Man," which wasn't even really based on my story, but anyway, that's enough about the movies . . .

Q: Why do you like to have Maine as a base for your stories? Is it because you love the state, or because it's really scary in the winter, or some other reason?

SK: It's what I know. Every place is scary to me, you know. In a sense, I'm always looking around. Even Cornell is an interesting place. There's apparently a brain museum here at Cornell. I don't know how many of you knew that. Somebody told me that this morning, and it kinda blew me away.

Maine is where I grew up. It's what I know. We went to Colorado for a while because I wanted a different location, and that worked. We went to England for awhile and there was just nothing there for me, so we came back.

Every place is good. I love this part of New York, it's very beautiful to look at.

Somebody once told me that you can write about a place when you know where all the roads go. I know where most of the roads go in Bangor, so . . .

Q: Are you still suffering from insomnia yourself, and what sort of thoughts do you have about this?

SK: Well, I think the thought that anybody who suffers from it has is "Will I ever go to sleep?" And the other part, the real interesting part of the cycle to me in insomnia is that you lie there and you don't go to sleep. And then you think to yourself, "If I don't go to sleep pretty soon, I'll feel terrible in the morning." This causes anxiety, anxiety makes it very difficult to get to sleep, and longer that goes by, the more anxious you become, so there's a kind of cycle.

No, I don't sleep very well. And the interesting thing is that in the course of writing this book, I suffered the worst insomnia of my life, I got about three hours of sleep a night. I became very conscious of when I was going to sleep. And when I was sliding off to sleep, I'd think "Oh! I'm going to sleep! It's finally happening!" And I'd get all excited, and I'd wake up! So I suffer it, but it's not terrible. It could be a lot worse. It's a lot worse for Ralph in the book.

Q: What made you decide to come to Cornell?

SK: Well, the college bookstore is an independent bookstore, and it was on the route, and I've never been to this part of the country on a motorcycle. It seemed like a real good idea at the time.

I mean, there's no big plan here, it just sort of happened. Viking wanted me to go on tour; I wanted to do the independents. I wanted to talk a little bit about their problems; so for all those reasons, it seemed like a pretty good idea.

Q: Robert Bloch passed away a couple of weeks ago; you've said that some of his work had an influence on your early writing. Do you have any thoughts about his work and its influence on your work and the field in general?

SK: Well, Bloch was one of the guys who made it possible for me to exist as a writer. And in a way, I feel like he and Richard Matheson and Henry Kuttner and some of the other people who worked in the field in the '40's and the '50's sowed this beautiful patch of ground and grew the crop, and I've

tional binging in fiction. Horror, comedy, all those things are a good way to do it.

So I'm real sorry that Bob passed. But he also had a long and fabulously creative life, and he was in a lot of pain in the last two or three months, and I'm glad that part of it's over.

Q: As a rock'n'roll fan, I've got to ask you this: now that Joey Ramone has been replaced, are you still a big fan?

SK: I'm gonna say this, and you can print it or not, but there's a group called Sloppy Seconds, that does now what the Ramones used to do, they really sound like that "Gabba Gabba Hey" kind of sound. They've got a wonderful single that nobody'll play on the radio called, "I Don't Want To Be A Homosexual." It's the sort of song that the Ramones used to do all the time, stuff like "The Blitzkrieg Bop" and "Cretin Hop." I like it, if it's you know, three chords and an attitude . . . of course, now that I think about it, a lot of the Ramones' stuff was two chords . . .

Q: Speaking of three chords and an attitude, are the Rock Bottom Remainders going to be doing anything anytime soon?

SK: I don't know. Good question.

Q: How's your radio station? Still rock'n'roll?

SK: No, we're all sports. This was a great decision on my part; we went all sports on the radio station, and then all the sports guys stopped playing! (laughter) It's typical.

Q: How do you look at your work when you're writing? Do you see yourself as writing great American novels or, uh — how do you look at that?

SK: No, I get an idea and I start to write, and hope that it will catch somehow. The best description I ever read of the process, the late Thomas Williams said that the characters are like people in a vast, black plain, standing around a little tiny fire, which is the writer's invention. And when you start, you sit down, there's really nothing but you and this little tiny idea, and what makes it worse is that you know that, however good the idea was when you got it, when you write it down on paper it will never seem as good to you as it seemed when it was up in your head. But sometimes they catch fire — it's like that little tiny fire in the blackness — if you're careful about the way you feed it, if you're lucky, if the wind doesn't blow it apart, if something doesn't happen. sometimes it turns into something that really cooks, that burns bright and hot.

So, I start with a concept. I have, usually, a vague idea of where I want to come out. For me, ideas come in two halves: a situation that just sort of knocks me out, that I want to play around with, and some kind of resolution. A lot of times, what I think is going to happen doesn't happen at the end of the book.

I wrote a novel called *Gerald's Game*, about a woman who's handcuffed to a bed, and I loved the idea of writing a novel about a lady in a room with no other characters, and I thought that if I could do this, it would be a really neat thing. And that's half the idea. Then you say, "But why is she handcuffed to the bed?" And then you say, "Well, she and her husband were playing sex games, and she wanted to quit, and he didn't and she kicked him and he had a heart attack and they were

gotta go along and pick it all after they've grown it. Bloch was the last member of the Lovecraft Circle that was still writing stories; there are a few people left who corresponded with Lovecraft, but he was the last one still writing stories. And I knew him; he was a gentleman, he was a lovely man, he had a great sense of humor. He was the one who taught me the line, interviewers would ask him, "Why do you write such terrible things?" and he would tell them, "I actually have the heart of a small boy, I keep it in a jar on my desk." And I got a lot of mileage out of that line, but I always quoted Bob.

Anyway, he went from writing these "Cthulhu Mythos" stories, that were sort of classic sort of horror tales out of Edgar Allan Poe and Lord Dunsany, and from there to science fiction and finally to psychological horror stories — Bob was the guy who wrote *Psycho* — and I was able to look, with the help of some other writers, because I'm not a real original guy. With Richard Matheson to show the way, and Rod Serling and some other people — Ira Levin, William Peter Blatty — I was able to see the possibility of creating an entire circumference of horror that used everything together. I'm not specifically interested in horror, but what I am interested in is emo-

out there in the woods and there she is chained to the bed."

I loved that concept, because right there is the potential to really stick it to the reader, which is the part that I like. Then the other part goes to work, the guy who is the business half of the team, and he says, "Well, how does it end? Does it have an Act III?"

And I said to myself, "I tell you what. I'll make her, like, in college, someone who did a lot of gymnastics, and then, when she's handcuffed to the bed, she can put her legs up over her head, push the balls of her feet against the wall, push the bed out and create a space. Then, she can skin the cat so she can stand behind the bed and push the bed across the room and get the key out of the dresser. End of story."

So I started to write and I got about thirty or forty or fifty pages in, and writing is visualization. And the more that I wrote, the more clearly I began to see this woman's position in the room. And what really turned on my lights was how small things became big in that story. Little tiny things became huge, it was almost like "The Incredible Shrinking Man." So finally, the more I wrote, the further in, the more I had invested, the more I started to doubt that my resolution was possible.

I have a friend who's a cop with the Bangor PD, and I went to see him and he got me a couple of pairs of handcuffs, and I took them home.

Our bed is the kind of bed that has a headboard with brass rods. And I got my oldest son, who was home from college, because he's very limber, and I said, "Joe, can I handcuff you to the bed?" (Explosive laughter) So he said, "Yeah, okay." So I laid him down on the bed and I got him handcuffed, one arm to each bedpost, like that, and he says, "Now what do I do?" So I said, "Well, see if you can get your ass up and your legs back and your feet flat against the wall." Which he did, at which point my wife came in and said, "What are you doing?" And I said "Research!"

And it turned out that Joe could push the bed away from the wall, but when he tried to actually go over backward, he stopped immediately and said, "If I do this, I'm gonna break my wrists, and I'm not gonna make it over."

So there I was, with all this time invested in this book, and I realized that what I wanted to write wouldn't work. So all of this is about writing a story, and it's about bliss in a way, and excitement and happiness. But none of it's about great literature. I'm not interested in great literature, I'm not interested in critical evaluations of literature. I read my reviews—there's one of *Insomnia* in **The New York Times** today — sometimes the reviews are good, sometimes the reviews are bad, but basically, critics are all a bunch of sidewalk superintendents. They're all standing around looking, saying it's gonna be a beautiful building, or it's gonna be an ugly building, or that guy's doing a good job, or that guy's not, and that's not my business. My business is to do whatever I can.

I'm forty-seven. If I don't crash my motorcycle, I've got about fifteen, twenty creative years left. I'm not worrying about great literature right now. Later on, people either read it or they don't. That was a long answer, wasn't it? I'll do some short ones now; how much time have we got left?

Q: Why do people always want to be scared?

SK: Why do they always want to be scared? 'Cause they're all sick like me. I don't know. I think it's fun to be scared in a safe environment.

Q: Are there plans for a new novel to be written?

SK: Oh yeah. There's a new novel that's done, actually.

Q: I know in your early years, you used to teach at Hamden Academy. Was there ever a time in your career when you got so frustrated as a writer that you just wanted to chuck the whole idea?

SK: No. I got really depressed a lot of the time that I was teaching high school. I can remember opening my sock drawer one day and seeing that half of my socks were purple, which was the color at Hamden, and thinking, "When all these socks are purple, I'm going to kill myself."

Q: What kind of motorcycle do you have?

SK: It's a Harley Heritage Softtail, 1986. 1350. Got two speeds, stopped and gone. It really goes fast but it's a good bike. There was a press conference in Manchester, which was my first stop, and somebody asked, "Do you have a name for your bike?" And because I suffer from a terminal smartass disease, I said "Yeah, Christine," but — it is the same color, it's red and cream, but the bike doesn't have a name, except I'm sure it's female. I don't know why, it just feels like a girl bike.

Q: What about your new novel? Can you tell us a bit about that?

SK: No.

Q: I wonder why you don't write directly for the screen.

SK: I don't think movies are anywhere near as interesting as books. Books are handmade; they're the product of one imagination; you can't spread around the blame or the credit in books

the way that you can in movies. Somebody said no great thing was ever done by committee, and with the exception of "Citizen Kane" and "Casablanca," I agree. But basically, movies are, in America, dumb art, okay, or not art at all. Why anybody would want to spend their life making pictures like "Demolition Man" or "Terminator" is something that I can't understand. But I go see 'em.

Thank you.

LECTURE "Q & A":

SK: I've got about five past nine. Are you tired, or can I answer some questions? I don't know how you want to do this, because I can't see that well because these lights are shining in my eyes. Maybe we could kill the spotlights.

(The lights are extinguished)

Look at that! This is power, folks. I wanna live forever.

Q: When's the next *Gunslinger* book coming out?

SK: Oh, there you are! I've written three novels about this guy called Roland, who is a gunslinger in a fantasy world, except that his world is very real to me. But I want to say one thing first—in a very real sense the next Gunslinger novel is out, *Insomnia's* it, and I'm not going to say any more about that, but if you read it, you'll know what I'm talking about. The guy from **The New York Times** didn't, but that's okay.

What happened, or what does happen, is that I get sandbagged by ideas. And *Insomnia* was a book that sort of happened. And then another book sort of happened—these things are like unplanned pregnancies! (Laughter) I have one more "bun in the oven" that I want to write, but then, next summer, because I'm tired of all this, I'm gonna sit down and I'm gonna write **all** those *Gunslinger* novels and they're all gonna be done!

(Cheers, applause)

Because I know the whole story now, and it's a really **good** story! And also, you may remember, the way the last one ended was mean. They were all on this train, and it's a robot train, and the train was psychotic, and it's asking them riddles, and they're asking it train riddles, because the train likes those things, because it's crazy, it's like *IT*, you know, it's like a train version of *IT*. And you just have to remember that in the Gunslinger's world, only seconds have passed.

But I got a letter from a grandmother, and she said she was sad, she was like seventy-two and might die soon, and I wrote her back and said I hoped she wouldn't — you know, I think she was trying to guilt-trip me!

Q: Which of your full-length novels do you think is your best work so far?

SK: I guess, probably, the temptation is to say the last one, because it's always the newest one. I don't want to do that. I think of all the books that I've written, I'd say *'Salem's Lot*, but I'd also say *The Dead Zone*. *The Dead Zone* feels like a real novel to me, where the other novels feel sort of situational. So I like *The Dead Zone* a lot.

I **do** like *Insomnia*, I'm not trying to sell it to you, one way or the other way. I like all the characters in *Insomnia*, and the way they keep showing up.

I also liked the film version of *The Dead Zone*, with Christopher Walken, which is not always true of the movies.

Q: How long have you been writing, and how old were you when you started writing?

SK: I was about six, and I couldn't really do much more than read a little bit. But I had one year when I was in first grade when I got rheumatic fever and I was in bed a lot of that year. But it was great, because when you were sick, you could have all the ice cream you wanted, and you could have all the comics you wanted. My mother started to drop over these comic books. So I started to write stories about Combat Casey and the Avengers and all this stuff, from

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the time I was barely able to write. And I really was very lucky, I had a supportive family who really put up with a lot of the bullshit, and so I started when I was really about, I'd say, six or seven years old.

Q: Where's Richard Bachman?

SK: Where's Richard Bachman? I keep thinking Richard died of cancer of the pseudonym, but, ah . . .

Richard was this guy who sort of came out of the woodwork, who's an ugly, mean, terrible person. I finally wrote a novel about **him** called *The Dark Half* (applause).

Q: Mr. King —

SK: Wait a second; I'm not finished yet; I'm not finished, but I will be soon.

Richard started out to be just a name where I could publish some early books like *The Long Walk* and *Rage*. *Rage* is a book I wish had never been published, because it seems like every asshole kid that held his class hostage in the last nine years has had that goddamn book in his pocket! The FBI has been to see me about it; I go, like, "Hey, I'm sorry I wrote it, but there it is! That's the way I felt when I was in high school, I wanted to do that, so I wrote a book about it. If you don't like it, fuck ya!"

(Applause)

So, Richard was a paper man, who didn't really exist at all, and then, after I had published the three books that I had as Bachman books, one day, when I wanted to write something else, Richard came to me and said, "I want to write one. I don't want to publish any more of your old ones, I want to write one, I have an idea." And I said, "Well, it's probably not a very good idea, Richard."

And if you think I'm making this up, this conversation in my head, you're crazier than I am, because these voices actually do talk. So he did this book called *Thinner* (applause) that he got the idea for when I was at Mohonk, in New Paltz. I'll get to the end of this in a minute, but . . .

My kids wanted to go up this trail up the side of a mountain. It's called the Labyrinth, and it goes through all these rocks. At that time, I weighed about 240 pounds and smoking three packs of cigarettes a day and I was really living an unhealthy lifestyle, and the kids had squirted through this thing, and I got . . . stuck. I got stuck between two rocks underground and in my mind, I'm thinking to myself, "My heart is going to explode. And they will have to bring a crane up this mountain and drag me out. And the headlines in the **New York Post** will say, 'Horror Writer Dragged Out of Cave by Crane.'"

It's embarrassing. It's embarrassing to be famous, let me tell you. You can't even go down the highway in your car and pick your nose. Everybody'll say, "Hey, it's Stephen King, pickin' his nose!" Then somebody will say, "That wasn't him!" And the other one'll say, "Yes it is," and they back up.

(laughter)

That's the truth. So anyway, I'm in there, and my heart is going like this, and I'm going "Please, God" — I made one of those "Please, God" deals; this is using God as Medcu! "Please, God, will you get me out of here and I'll change my ways."

Well, I got out, and I decided I was going to lose some weight — Richard was watching all of this from his little place — and what I found out was that I could lose the weight, but I wanted to be big. And Richard said, "I want to write a story about somebody who's losing a lot of weight." So I wrote it, and Richard has gone away. I thought he was gone away permanently, but now he's got another idea, so he wants to sit down and write too.

Q: Mr. King, I'm sorry for interrupting you earlier. I just —

SK: You oughtta be, boy, you oughtta be sorry! (Laughter)

But that's okay.

Q: I was just wondering if we were going to have any kind of followup to *Danse Macabre* anytime soon?

SK: Oh, that was too hard, that was **real** stuff; I mean, that was like a true facts books. That was only about horror films, but it was a true-facts book. With my schedule in my house, I would sit down about eight o'clock in the morning and start to write until noon; but with *Danse Macabre* it took me until twelve-thirty and then one and sometimes quarter past one, because you couldn't make it up out of your head, you had to check all this stuff, and it was boring. I didn't like that, I'd much rather make stuff up.

But I might go back to *Danse Macabre* and update it, because there've been a lot of horror movies that've come out since then. I thought that some of them were kinda wet farts, like the Coppola "Dracula." But there were some like "The Hitcher" and some other things that have come along that I think are pretty scary, and I would like to write about those.

Q: Who was the real-life person who inspired the central character in *Misery*?

SK: Did you guys hear that?

Crowd: No!

SK: Good, never mind! (Laughter, applause)

Ooooh, shit . . . He asked me who the real-life figure was that inspired the central character in *Misery*, and I wondered if you meant the nurse, because that was me.

(More laughter, drowns out remark by the questioner)

He said, no, that was his sister.

Q: Do you ever scare yourself with your books?

SK: Do I ever scare myself with my books; that's sort of like "fright masturbation."

(Laughter)

I don't know, sometimes I do. When I'm writing, sometimes things will come back—sometimes they come back . . . a little joke there (laughter) . . . never mind, it doesn't matter . . .

So that later on, you're thinking of those things, you know, later on — you don't too much about it at the time, and then later on it's like, for some of you, some of you will actually have to drive home in the dark tonight. And at some point, you'll say, "Wouldn't it be funny, I mean I know he was just joking , but if there was somebody in the back seat, all hunkered down, you know, with a long barbecue fork" — for some reason, a barbecue fork is what you will see, possibly because I put it in your mind right now, and you'll see, you'll say to yourself, "I did forget to check, and I do think I hear something back there . . . " (SK makes heavy breathing sounds)

So, every now and then I will bring something up that seems like a riot at the time that I wrote it, since a lot of this stuff really is very childish. I've said a lot of times that I'll try to terrify you if I can't horrify you, and if I can't horrify you, then I'll go for the gross-out. It's like when you're a kid and you say to your sister, "You wanna seafood?" And then, "BLEAHHHH, see food?" I love that sort of gross-out moment or idea.

My mother used to tell the story—and I like these ideas! —She grew up in Scarborough, Maine, the daughter of a handyman. There was a ragman that came around once a week, and they got gum, but the gum had to last them for a whole week. So, you chew the gum, and then you jump into bed — she was one of five sisters, and their beds were all lined up like the Five Little Peppers. And you'd put the gum on the bedpost and you'd leave it there and it would harden overnight, and the next morning you'd start to chew it again.

Well, one night she put hers on the bedpost, and before it could harden, a very large moth flew down and got stuck on the gum. And when she got up the next morning, she didn't look (disgusted moans and groans begin). She just popped the gum into her mouth, and the moth was still alive (louder moans and groans). She bit it in half (Still louder moans and groans). And the two pieces started to flutter! One of the pieces she spit right out, but the other squirting piece of moth was kinda stuck between her teeth. When I was three, she told me that story and made me the man I am today! (King dissolves in laughter at the end of this sentence and the entire room dissolves into laughter and thunderous applause) So, I'll get to the end of this; yeah, I'll get to the end of it soon . . .

A good example of that is — I wrote this novel, *The Shining*, and there's this one scene (applause) — Hey! This is sort of like the Rolling Stones without the music! I can say titles and you can clap. . .*Tommyknockers*! (applause) . . . *Cujo*! (more applause) . . . What was I talking about?

So, I knew that there was going to be this scene in this book where this little boy, who was psychic, would go into this hotel room, Room 217 — the number is still burned on my brain. And I knew that he was going to go in there and there was going to be a dead woman in the tub, and she was going to get out, and he was going to try to make her gone, the way he does his other visions, and she wasn't going to go, because this hotel is a very scary place. Psychic phenomena actually attain reality.

And I knew it was going to be bad, because two or three days before, I started to think, "Three days 'till 217," then it was two days, and then it "Today is 217 day." And when I started to write, my heart was beating, not very fast, but very hard, and I knew that if I wanted to, I could slip into that, and I did. And when I did, I scared the living Jesus out of myself. And of course, later on, that woman came and visited me at night (There is a very sudden, very loud burst from the speakers above King's head, causing him to jump about three feet straight up).

Did you guys plan that? (laughter) Holy God . . .

One or two more, one or two more . . .

I will say that one time that I wrote about something that I was really terrified of, and that was when I wrote *Pet Sematary*, because so much of that is based on (inaudible)

Q: Are you going to appear in your next movie?

SK: I don't know, I've kinda got this Alfred Hitchcock thing going, but he's dead. The answer is, you'll have to go and find out!

Q: How do you think your books compare to the movies that are made from them?

SK: Well, they're poles apart; I mean, on one hand, you have something like "Children of the Corn," or "Graveyard Shift," and on the other hand you've got something like "Shawshank Redemption," a picture that's out right now. And if it's not here, I guess it will be fairly soon. Kathy Bates just finished "Dolores Claiborne," which looks fantastic, with Jennifer Jason Leigh as her daughter. It's a good piece of work, but "Shaw-

shank Redemption" is the best film adaptation I've ever had.

I sort of felt like Rob Reiner got inside my head when he did "Stand By Me." I cried when they screened that. Rob came up and set it up in a basement room and showed it to me, and it blew me away. But for me, I love stories, and I love to write books and I love to read books. But I like the movies too and I always will. But when somebody comes up and wants to make a film out of something I wrote, it's kind of like a grab bag; you reach in, and sometimes you get something that's not very good, you get a junky prize. And at others, you get something that's fairly nice. And in the case of "Shawshank Redemption," you know — *Different Seasons* has been a book that was very lucky for me, it was like "Stand By Me" in that it turned out fairly well.

Can we get like two more?

Q: What advice do you have about revision of fiction?

SK: Revise a lot. What is it the carpenters say? You know, "measure twice and cut once." And in my case, I think you should measure once and cut two or three times.

One more . . .

Q: I was reading *Pet Sematary*, and I saw the front cover, and it ruined the book for me, and I wonder if you have any control over the covers?

SK: Why did it ruin the book for you?

Q: I knew what was going to happen.

SK: How did you know that?

Q: He was carrying his son.

SK: But everything that was really gooshy happened after that.

I have some cover control, I'm lucky. But that was a Doubleday cover, and the less said about my Doubleday years, the better . . .

Maybe just one more real quick one, but before I say this, you guys have been really great to have me, thank you. (Applause)

Q: What were you like in college?

SK: What was I like in college ... ? Mostly drunk. Thank you

(King exits to lengthy applause)

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GET OFF MY CLOUD

J. CHARLES CARUSO

J. CHARLES CARUSO is a talented, young writer from Seattle, Washington, and he marks his return to the pages of *Cemetery Dance* with the following tale of dark deceit.

By the time Professor Spano turned his VW up the short gravel drive that led to Tanya's mobile home, the Bug's steering wheel was so slick with sweat that he could barely keep his grip. It was a cold, drizzling day in January and anyone who had seen Spano would have thought he'd been caught unprepared in the rain. His dark bangs lay matted against his forehead and his gray cotton shirt clung to his chest and stomach. But Spano was soaked in perspiration, not rain. He knew he was a damn fool for coming and part of him wanted to turn around even before he saw Pete's pick-up parked next to the trailer. Spano's heart began to leap around inside his chest like trout in a fisherman's net.

He eased his Bug in next to the pick-up, parking on the side away from the house. That way if Pete was hiding in there waiting to take pot shots at him with a hunting rifle, the truck would be in the way. Spano turned off his car and sat there for a minute. He didn't know what the hell was going on. Tanya had called sounding desperate and he'd dutifully dropped everything and come running. From inside the house, he could hear the pound of the Rolling Stones on the stereo. The white gauze curtains of the living room window flickered open and he caught a glimpse of a face.

He had his hand on the ignition when the front door flew open, but it was only her. She slammed the door behind her and came running down the wooden steps in flip-flops, her gauzy, gypsy skirt fluttering back to give him a few flashes of her pale and well-shaped legs. She wore a billowing white blouse that stretched tight against her thin torso and small, high breasts, which jiggled slightly as she rushed down the steps. Her long black hair flew out behind her and he saw the color that had risen in her fine, pale features.

Tanya hurried to the car and he cranked down his window. "Thank God you came," she said, out of breath. "You're a goddamn Delivering Angel." She smelled of fresh cigarettes. When she leaned her head inside the car to kiss him, her lips were cold and tasted of smoke.

Spano force himself to smile. "Well, I figured what the hell. Hope springs eternal and all that."

"What?"

I ought to be quoting Byron, not Wordsworth, he thought. *Wordsworth would never understand why I'm here. Byron might.* "Of course I came," he said. "What's wrong?"

He noticed now that a red welt glowed on her cheek and her eyes were damp with tears. "It's Pete. He found out about us."

Spano felt himself flush. From his armpits, cold sweat trickled down over his ribs. "Shit." He leaned his forehead onto the steering wheel.

She placed a hand on his shoulder. "Come inside."

"Are you crazy?"

She exhaled a laugh that wasn't a laugh. "Maybe. But I need you to come inside."

"No way," he said. "You told me what a jealous son of a bitch he is. He'll kill me."

"No," she said. "He's not here."

"But that's his truck. Where does Pete ever go without his truck?"

"Just come in, please."

"All right," Spano said. "I'll come inside for a minute, but I hope you're packing. We've got to get the hell out of here."

Tanya hung on his arm as they went up the wooden steps and into the house. The living room stood in its usual state of disarray, dirty dishes on every flat surface, empty beer cans clustered here and there, shoes littering the floor, an ironing board set up on one corner with a jumbled pile of clothes underneath it. The television played a daytime drama, but the sound was lost under the cranked up stereo. The loud music seemed to intensify the chaos somehow.

Tanya closed the door and locked it. "You didn't tell anyone where you were going, did you?"

"No. I told the department secretary I had to cancel my afternoon classes because my cousin was in a car wreck. I said I had to go to the hospital since I was the only relative in town."

"Good." She pulled a strand of dark hair out of her face and tucked it behind her ear.

"What's going on?" he asked. "Last time we talked you said we should stop seeing each other."

"You've got to help me, Cyril."

It struck him as odd, but her using his first name made the gravity of the situation sink in. It calmed him somehow. He couldn't remember ever hearing her call him Cyril. She always called him Professor. It was the sort of thing that he had initially found rather titillating, but the longer their affair went on, the more it came to bother him. He realized she didn't do it to be cute so much as to maintain the distance between them.

"You've got to forget about all that stuff I said before," she said. "About me staying with him instead of you. You promise me you'll forget all that. Because it's just you and me now, Cyril. I didn't know what I was saying before. I need you." She was trembling and her hands kept moving around like they were searching for something to do. "I need you. I know you're real smart. That's why I called you. I know you'll figure out what we should do."

Spano went over to the stereo and turned it down.

She rushed over and turned the volume back up.

"I can barely hear you," he said.

"We got to leave it loud. I'll go crazy if we don't. I swear that music's the only thing keeping me from flying off the earth." She moved to the kitchen table and got herself a cigarette.

He stared at her. It was strange, he thought. He'd never seen her as the heroine of a tragic drama, but all of a sudden she had started to sound like the lead female in a Tennessee Williams play. "Sit down and tell me what happened," he said.

She shook her head, exhaling smoke. "Come with me and I'll show you."

He followed her down the narrow hallway, the blue shag of the carpet giving slightly under his feet. They stepped over a man's leather belt with a brass cowboy buckle that said Winchester Rifles on it.

When Spano saw the bathroom, he felt a wave of nausea wash over him and his vision started to gray at the edges. Pete, Tanya's big, bearish husband, wearing only his boxer shorts, lay on the linoleum floor curled into a fetal position. His head was crowded in between the far wall and the toilet. Blood, just beginning to turn dry and sticky, covered his body and the floor of the bathroom. A sweet stink hung in the air. On Pete's back and shoulder, wiry black hairs stuck up through the glaze of gore. A butcher's knife rested lonely at the bottom of the empty bathtub. Only a few drops of blood spotted the porcelain tub; it seemed very white and clean compared to the floor and walls.

"I never thought there would be so much blood," she said. "There's so goddamn much blood. How am I ever going to clean it all up?"

"You killed him," Spano said. It sounded stupid, but he didn't know what else to say. The whole scene struck him as surreal, like a dream or a movie set. "I can't believe you fucking killed him!"

"Son of a bitch hit me with his belt. Hit me in the face. With the buckle end," she said. "He can't hit me in the face. It's all I got." She leaned forward, jutting her chin towards Pete's unmoving back. "You hear that?" she shouted. "You can't hit me in the face." She stood upright and turned to face Spano. "I need a drink," she said and headed back down the hall to the kitchen.

Spano stood staring at the bathroom. After a while he noticed the sink. It stood half-full with gray water, a ring of foam and whiskers around the edge. Submerged in the water, a chrome safety razor lay at the bottom of the sink across the closed drain. It was a simple thing, almost not worth noticing, but that razor in the water seemed suddenly so desperate to him. What sort of world was it that a man could be stabbed in the back by his wife while he was shaving in his own bathroom?

When Spano went out to the kitchen, Tanya was pouring herself a slug of gin in a Garfield coffee mug. "God, I need a drink," she said. "You want some?"

"We need to keep our heads clear right now. This is going to take some thinking. Better make some coffee or tea. Something to keep us alert."

"So you'll help me?"

"Of course I'll help you."

Her mouth curved upwards at the ends into what at any other time would have been a beautiful smile. Considering the situation, Spano only saw a grimace.

"I'll put on some water to boil." She held the mouth of the tea kettle up to the gushing tap. "What are we going to do, dump the body in the woods? Or I think I heard bleach or Dran-O or something will dissolve a body."

Spano shook his head. "Too messy and complicated."

"What then?"

"Simple is best. We've got to keep it as simple as possible." He sat down at the kitchen table. "Goddamn it, I wish you would turn down that music. I can't even hear my own thoughts." Mick Jagger was screaming his way through a live version of "Get Off My Cloud." Spano kept thinking of a dumb joke he'd heard in the awkward moments before a department faculty meeting the week before. What did Mick Jagger say when he came into his bedroom and saw the publisher of *Playboy* humping Dennis Weaver? Hey, Hugh, get off McCloud.

Spano tried to shake the bad joke out of his head and to concentrate on what he knew about Pete. There had to be something he could use to obscure the murder, to delay its discovery at least. Pete was an

independent contractor. He loved football, probably sports in general, although by the size of him he didn't play them himself. He got his thrills vicariously, sitting in front of the television with his feet up on the coffee table drinking beer. No, that was it! He hunted. He was always going off on hunting trips with his buddies. That was how Spano and Tanya had gotten together for their first weekend — Pete had been away on a hunting trip. "What if everyone thought he was on a hunting trip? It would buy us some time. The trail would get colder. I read somewhere that if a murder isn't solved in the first week chances are it won't ever be."

"Yeah, that would work," she said. "I think it would anyway, but I don't know what's in season right now. Something must be."

"That's okay," he said. "It doesn't matter right now. We can call Fish and Game, find out easily enough. All we have to do this minute is get rid of the body and maybe dispose of his truck." Schemes were flooding into Spano's mind now. It scared him how quickly he had adapted to this line of thought. He'd never seen himself as the devious type, but the ideas were coming to him with so little effort. Having given himself over to the plotting, he became a cold, efficient machine, untroubled by the morality of concealing this murder. Nothing seemed right or wrong to him as he studied the situation. Whatever lies and deceptions they would undertake now appeared as removed from their lives and as calculated as moves in a game of chess.

"We'll take everything out of the truck," he said. "Remove all the registration forms, the insurance, any personal items that might lead it back to Pete or you. Then we'll park it downtown at night, in a bad area, with the keys in the door like whoever it was just forgot them. By morning the truck will be gone. We don't report it missing — we don't know it is. Chances are, they'll never find it. They have a hard enough time finding stolen cars that are reported. If it does turn up, it'll be a decent red herring in their search for Pete."

There was no mistaking Tanya's expression now. It was a grin, full and sexy and unmarred with worry. "Jesus," she said. "I think you missed your calling, Professor. You should have been a criminal."

"Yeah, I guess it's never too late to turn bad."

"No, it's not," she said, somber again. "If you ask me, it's too goddamn easy to go bad. The hard part is going back." Tanya took a big swallow of gin and shivered all over. "God, that helps. You sure you don't want a drink?"

"No, thanks. I need to figure out what to do with the body. We can't just dump it. Sooner or later they'll find it and then they'll tie it back to us as sure as anything. What we have to do is hide the body where they won't ever find it. *Corpus delicti.* If there's no body, there's no crime."

"So what are you saying? Hide the body in the attic and hope they don't look there? I don't have an attic. No basement either. Besides, that's the first place they'd look."

"You're forgetting, nobody knows. As far as anyone else is concerned, nothing has happened. We could sit here all afternoon and all night waiting to hear sirens and they would never come. There's no reason for anyone to come poking around here. We just don't give them a reason. Pete split. You don't know where he went. Nobody does. The cops aren't going to assume you killed him just because nobody knows where he is. I remember there was a story in the newspaper a few months ago about a guy who killed his wife and kept her in a storage locker for seven years. The only reason they finally found the body was he quit paying the bill and they emptied out his locker. If he'd kept paying the bill, they never would have found her. Another guy killed his girlfriend and hid the body in an old refrigerator behind his house. I don't think they discovered that body until he was killed in a car wreck and the landlord went over to clear out the place for a new tenant."

"That's it, then," she said. "Pete's got a big freezer out back he keeps all the meat in — venison, elk, everything. It's big enough and it's even got a lock on it."

"Perfect. We'll wrap him up in some plastic garbage bags, put him in the bottom of it and fill the top up with meat. They'll never find him."

Tanya laughed, bit her lower lip. "This is really going to work, isn't it?"

Spano nodded. "We have to keep our cool. You especially. In a while the cops might come around asking questions, but if you play it off right, with a little luck, no one will ever know."

"God," she said. "You're a genius. I knew you could figure it out. The perfect murder." She shook her head. "The perfect murder."

Spano smiled up at Tanya, gazing into her admiring eyes. He was pleased with himself and even a little amazed. He'd done it, thought his way into the predicament and then back out of it. It seemed almost too easy. He felt a small soap bubble of conscience rise up from his chest and pop in his mind. *This is wrong,* he thought, but the idea progressed no further. Tanya's eyes moved up quickly from his face to a spot just over his shoulder and it felt as if a freight train hit him from behind. Everything turned into nothing.

Spano's forehead smacked the kitchen table and stayed there. A dark puddle began to spread around his face, the blood leaking rapidly from a hole opened up in the back of his head.

"Honey, throw me a dish towel before this fuck starts leaking all over the floor," Pete said.

Tanya grabbed the towel that was looped through the handle of the refrigerator and tossed it to her husband. "Shit, Pete. Did you have to use my new iron?"

"You didn't leave the hammer out where I told you to. What the hell was I supposed to whack him with? My dick?" He set the iron on the table and put the towel around Spano's head to soak up the blood.

"I thought it looked too suspicious. The Professor's pretty smart. Or he was, anyway. See how he figured out just what to do real quick. God, we never would of come up with all those angles."

"Yeah, too damn smart for his own good."

Tanya, picked up her mug. "You want some gin?"

Pete made a noise. "Give me a beer. I'm going to go shower off this goddamn pig blood. It's making me itch. Why don't you go empty out that freezer."

Tanya got a can of beer from the fridge and brought it to Pete. "I did good, didn't I?"

Pete took the beer from her hand, popped it open. "Yeah, you were almost like some professional actress. You just keep other men out of my bed from now on and you'll be doing real good."

"You didn't have to hit me with the belt," she said. "I know you wanted to make it seem true to life and all, but you didn't have to go and hit me with the belt."

"You had it coming."

Tanya looked back and forth between his eyes, searching them for a flicker of compassion. They were as hollow and dangerous as the twin barrels of a shotgun.

"Go on and empty that freezer," Pete said. "And be sure you make plenty of room. I might just decide to put you in there with loverboy."

Tanya's fear welled up into her voice. "Pete, don't say things like that to me. I gave you him, didn't I? You said you'd lay off me if I helped you with this. Doesn't it prove I love you."

Pete raised his arm as if to strike her across the face with the back of his hand. When she flinched away, he lowered his arm. His smile showed a possessive affection but no warmth. "You still got some paying to do as far as I'm concerned. I'm not forgetting about this, Tanya. You fucking betrayed me. You do it again, you will be sharing the freezer with Professor Shithead. And don't think I won't do it."

She reached out to touch Pete's bare chest, but he moved out of her reach. "I'm going to take a shower." He turned and stomped down the hall to the bathroom.

The tea kettle on the stove began to scream. Tanya went over and took it off the burner.

— CD

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MOMMY

A Feature Movie Review

Gary A. Braunbeck

MOMMY: Written and directed by Max Allan Collins; starring Patty McCormack, Jason Miller, Brinke Stevens, Michael Cornelison, Mickey Spillane, Rachel Lemieux, Majel Barret Roddenbury, Sarah Jane Miller; released to video through Eagle Entertainment, priced for rental, unrated; running time: 89 minutes.

Rating: ★★★ (out of four)

Over the last few years I have come to the conclusion that whenever an author decides to try his/her hand at directing a motion picture, you can bet there'll be no middle ground when it comes to quality; it will either be abysmal *(Maximum Overdrive, Tough Guys Don't Dance)* or brilliant *(Silent Tongue, The Ninth Configuration).* As a result, a lot of people (including myself) view the directorial debut of an author with mixed feelings—and I have to be honest, when I first sat down to view *Mommy,* the maiden effort from executive producer/writer/director Max Allan Collins, I'd already decided to approach it the same way I'd approached other authors' filmmaking efforts: cross my fingers and hope for the best.

Boy, do I feel silly.

Not only does *Mommy* prove me wrong on my point about the extremes in quality, it let me know in the first few minutes that the man at the helm knows his stuff, so all my anxiety was for nothing.

The press kit accompanying the video cassette draws several comparisons between *Mommy* and the 1956 film, *The Bad Seed.* Now, while I can see a few similarities (the presence of the redoubtable McCormack being the most obvious), I found that *Mommy* has much more in common with the astonishing *The Stepfather* from the late 1980s. Both films deal with an obsessive parent, both films manage to delve the depths of their central character's particular psychosis without offering much of an explanation as to *why* they're the way they are, and both films offer a flip-side view of the Norman Rockwell-esque portrait of Middle America.

While *Mommy* never quite reaches the dizzying heights of terror that made *The Stepfather* one of the most frightening films I've ever seen, it *does* offer several memorably suspenseful sequences, top-notch performances by most of the cast (McCormack, Rachel Lemieux, and Michael Cornelison offer towering characterizations), and something that *The Stepfather* didn't have: a surprising and powerful detour into desperate poignancy that gives the film a lasting emotional undercurrent that's hard to get out of your mind once the closing credits roll.

The plot concerns what happens when Mrs. Sterling (McCormack), who in many ways is the anti-Mrs. Cleaver, a recent widow with a penchant for perfection, impulsively kills her daughter's teacher (played by Majel Barret-Roddenbury, who's in the film all too briefly) during a parent/teacher conference. Though she is the one who calls the authorities (inventing a thin, obvious, She-Was-Already-Dead-When-I-Got-T here story), the police (embodied here by the craggy Jason Miller) immediately suspect her of foul play. The majority of the film's central section details the subsequent investigation and how several peripheral domestic situations snowball into tragedy as a result of Mrs. Sterling's duplicity.

I realize that's not much of a synopsis, but Collins has packed his script with several surprising plot twists that a more detailed description would ruin for the viewer; suffice to say that Mrs. Sterling, a three-time widow, is not the only person who isn't what she appears to be, and that several of the characters wind up lying not only to each other but to themselves, as well, resulting in a memorably tangled moral web as the film enters its sometimes astonishing final third.

I say "astonishing" because it's in the last third of the film that *Mommy* veers away (at least for a while) from the expected cat-and-mouse play that marks a lot of films in this suspense subgenre; Collins wisely decides to use the majority of the final third to grapple with the complexities of Mrs. Sterling's relationship with her young daugh-

ter Jessica Ann. It's almost as if Collins realized that Jessica Ann's loyalty to her mother (who she loves deeply) could serve as a symbol of every child's loyalty to a parent—even one they know has committed monstrous acts.

I think it's safe to tell you that Jessica Ann witnesses her mother murdering someone, but allows herself to be convinced that the murder was justified—even though Jessica Ann has come to suspect that her mother might have murdered not only her teacher and the school janitor, but her father, as well. Knowing that the police will be arriving soon with a warrant for her arrest, Mrs. Sterling and Jessica Ann flee into the night, finally winding up at a motel when weariness prevents them from fleeing farther. The scene in the motel room when the two of them arrive and begin to unpack is a minor masterpiece of subtext. On the surface, nothing much happens (unpacking, checking how much money they have, getting ready for bed), and not very much is said (there are several prolonged silences in the scene, but those silences are golden), but underneath every silence, every move, every look, is a powerful desperation and an almost unbearable genuine human pain. To further go into this scene would be to diminish its power, just make sure that when it comes around you pay close attention to everything that goes on: I can remember only a handful of films where two characters' *entire lives* were summed up with such deftness and compassion and subtlety. Both McCormack and Lemieux are superb in this scene, and I guarantee you that it will blindside you with its wisdom and poignancy.

The *denouement*, while expertly photographed, edited, and paced, plays out with a fairly decent amount of suspense, but there's a pall of familiarity that hangs over the last seven minutes; while unarguably exciting, it's not a particularly inspired finish; it doesn't help that the character of Lt. March (a role originally intended for the wonderful Miguel Ferrer), as played by Miller, seems not only distracted most of the time, but downright hungover at moments, as if he'd been pulled out of the local drunk tank to take over the case. Add to that some of the most self-consciously eerie music I've heard in ages (if the music was supposed to be tongue-in-cheek, it didn't make it), and you've got a fairly disappointing finish to what is otherwise a crackling good thriller.

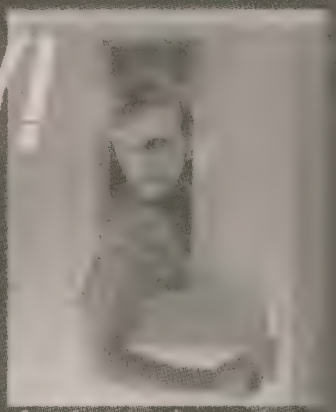
Still, at the center of it all, McCormack never falters. Her Mrs. Sterling is memorable; with the steely eyes of Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct*, the shapely form of Donna Reed in *From Here To Eternity*, and the tight-skinned, Death's-Head smile of Mary Tyler Moore in *Ordinary People*, McCormack is both the ideal of the American Woman/Lover/Mother and its deadly antithesis. She's given strong support from Lemieux (a young actress of refreshing depth and power) and Cornelison (who you may remember from Frank Darabont's extraordinary adaptation of Stephen King's "The Woman In the Room.").

Scream Queen Brinke Stevens—alluring as ever—tries her hand at a change of pace role, and while she doesn't have the acting skills or depth of her co-star, she manages to exude warmth, tenderness, and concern as Jessica Ann's spiritual aunt; Mickey Spillane, as Mrs. Sterling's lawyer, is, well . . . Mickey Spillane. (But who's complaining? He's *MICKEY SPILLANE!)*

Collins displays a firm directorial hand; the editing is lean and muscular, the violence, when it flares, is fast, hard, and unsensational, there are countless priceless throwaway bits inserted in every scene (my favorite: the bumper sticker on Mrs. Sterling's car—BECAUSE I'M THE MOMMY, THAT'S WHY), and his sense of visual composition is quite impressive. I look forward to seeing his next film, whenever it may come.

In the meantime, there's *Mommy;* tense, clever, often darkly funny, surprisingly wise and poignant in its depiction of human emotional vulnerability, sometimes flawed (but not terminally so), and ultimately damned entertaining. Strongly recommended.

HEEEEEEERE'S MOMMY!



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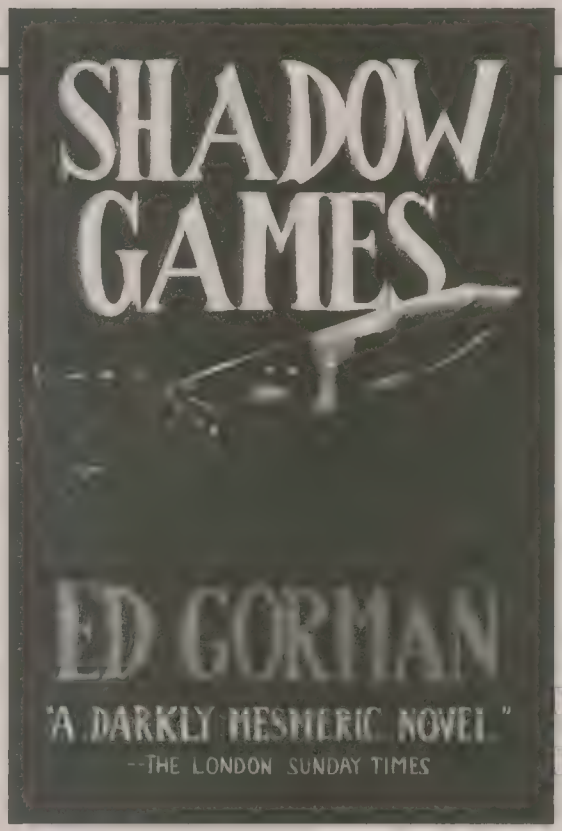

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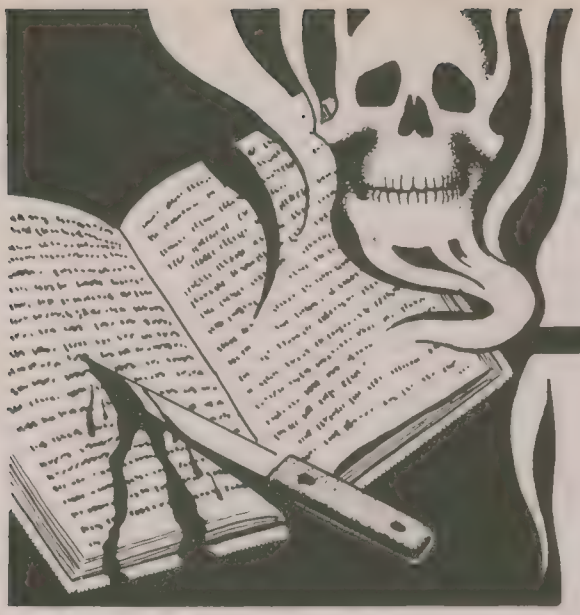

CD REVIEWS

BOOKS, VIDEOS, SOFTWARE...

***Cages* by Ed Gorman (Deadline Press, 374 pp, $35.00 hc ISBN 9631367-6-3).**

The moment you pick up this hefty collection you know that Gorman is coming at you with the gloves off; not only is it his longest and widest ranging collection (containing everything from suspense to science, from mainstream to western to out-and-out horror), it is also his most thoughtful and mature, with hands-down the richest and most deeply affecting prose this fine writer has ever produced. At 150,000 words, *Cages* would be a bargain even if all the stories were reprints; when you consider that nearly 50,000 words of it is brand-new, never-before-published work (all of it award-worthy), the collection easily becomes one of the most important of the year.

The darkly powerful expressionistic cover (by artist Carlos Batts), relying heavily on the contrast of red on black, serves as both a visual metaphor and an unspoken warning of what waits for the reader between the covers—and make no mistake about it: many of the stories are disturbing in the extreme.

The stories are about exactly what the title says—cages; physical, spiritual, psychological, and emotional ones. Like Gorman's other collections, this one is filled with razor-sharp prose and compelling (if not always likeable) characters; unlike his other collections, *Cages* finds Gorman in a more overtly philosophical mood—yet he never falls victim to the ponderous self-importance that sinks so many writers whose work turns "serious."

In each of the twenty-one tales the reader encounters characters who find themselves trapped in one way or another—in cold, loveless marriages, in poverty, by loneliness or rage, low self-esteem or jealousy or ignorance or, as in "Long Lonesome Roads" and the stunning "The End of It All," even their own bodies; but in Gorman's wistful, damaged world, there is no cage from which one cannot escape—providing one is willing to accept the consequences.

The collection opens with the novella "Moonchasers," where two young boys meet up with a wounded criminal who's hiding in an abandoned warehouse. Because of the criminal's resemblance to Robert Mitchum (the boys' personal hero), and because of the sad and dull life they lead, the boys agree to keep the criminal's presence a secret and even go so far as to help him with food and medical supplies. The first half of this marvelous coming-of-age piece (which refreshingly lacks any of the clichés associated in stories of this type) chronicles the boys' growing relationship with not only the criminal but themselves, their families, and their community, as well. (I can't remember the last time I came across a period piece that so effortlessly captured its time and place).

Soon, though, they fall under the suspicion of a swaggering, sadistic local cop named Cushing, laying the groundwork for the unique, nerve-wracking game of cat-and-mouse that composes the second half of the story, leading all four characters toward a final, violent, and strangely poignant confrontation.

Following "Moonchasers" is the short but genuinely touching western "Mainwaring's Gift," a tone poem about the relationship between a ranch hand and a dying prostitute who meet up for the second time on Christmas Eve. Their meeting has some surprising—and quietly moving—results, culminating in six of the most jewel-like final sentences this side of Dylan Thomas.

"The Brasher Girl" is one of the most unpredictable pieces in the collection. What starts out as a sexy romance quickly turns into a Bonnie-and-Clyde piece, only to shift gears into science fiction and end on a brutal note of supernatu-

ral horror. The term "roller-coaster ride" comes to mind. Had a writer of less skill tried to throw so many disparate elements into a story the results would have been laughable–if not outright unreadable–but Gorman has a firm hand on the proceedings, adding more than a dash of grim humor along the way, stirring things up with a breathless pace and a sympathetic central character. This terrific story puts Gorman solidly in territory usually thought to be the sole province of Dean Koontz.

"One Of Those Days, One Of Those Nights," is a comedy of errors worthy of Preston Sturges. Rich Donaldson, the narrator, is one of those guys who just seems to always screw up–but with the best intentions. His wife, Laura, married him instead of the wealthier suitor, Chris Tomlin. Where Donaldson's job has been filled with lots of "lateral movement," Tomlin's career is skyrocketing, so it comes as no surprise that Donaldson worries when he accidentally finds a letter from Tomlin to Laura. He has a lousy day at work, especially after his boss catches him reading the letter.

"You're one of those guys who reads his wife's mail, aren't you?" she asks. "My last three husbands did the same thing to me, the bastards."

So much for moving up the corporate ladder on this day.

Plus, his car is falling apart.

Then he and Laura argue after he picks her up.

Oh, yeah–an armed gunman jumps into the back seat and holds them up. But Donaldson has no cash on him. The gunman holds Laura hostage while Donaldson runs to the nearest ATM machine to withdraw his limit–something he can't afford. But wouldn't you know, there's a guy in front of him in line who cleans out the machine.

It gets worse from there. I won't tell you the rest, suffice to say that this is one of Gorman's most humorous and warm-hearted stories, with a wrap-up that'll leave you smiling.

Other excellent stories include the elegiac modern-day western "Pards," a beautiful and sad study of losers and loneliness; "The Beast in the Woods," a heart-wrencher about a farmer and his retarded son; "Survival," a dark science fiction about the value placed on empathy in a world too full of suffering; and "The Face," Gorman's modern classic Civil War ghost story.

Now we come to my personal favorite in the collection, "The End Of It All." This brilliant, unsettling story about the high cost of low self-esteem reads like a cross between *Frankenstein* and *The Bridges of Madison County*. In the case of this story, the cage of less-than-perfect flesh is given the illusion of perfection through plastic surgery, but the characters make the mistake of believing that altering the shell alters the Self, and, consequently, makes Life the wonderful dream they've always wanted it to be. The plot jerks your emotions around with unnerving ease, going from psychological violence to aching pathos, from jealous one-upmanship to murder, then from murder to an ultimate, depraved, and tragic act of role-reversal. To be any more specific would ruin this astounding tale for you, one that is sure to be a Bram Stoker finalist next year. Horror stories better than this simply don't exist.

Cages is a powerful, disturbing, poetic, consistently superior collection, filled with writing that is a model of clarity and tight narrative control, and should be required reading for anyone who wants to experience the art of short fiction as practiced by a master craftsman.

– Gary A. Braunbeck

***Bloodlines* by J.N. Williamson (Longmeadow Press, 307 pp, $19.95 hc ISBN 0-681-00693-5).**

With the release of *Bloodlines*, J.N. Williamson brings to a close the thematic trilogy that began with *Don't Take Away the Light* and continued through last year's *The Book of Webster's*. On the surface, *Bloodlines* would have you believe that it's a modern-day vampire story–God knows that enough of the trappings rear their ugly heads–but this excellent novel is, at heart, an angry study of emotional and social decay. It also manages to reconcile the quiet pain of *Light* with the savage, gleeful violence of *Webster's* to paint a portrait of America in the nineties that is not at all flattering. If you want a safe, comfortable vampire story, one where the concept never strays from the traditional boundaries, look elsewhere.

The story concerns itself with Marshall Madison, a widower who's estranged from his two children–and for good reason; he abandoned them to the care of the county after his wife's suicide. His daughter, Caroline, is placed with a foster family while her brother, Thad, runs away to become a denizen of the streets, living a miserable existence inside a rat-infested flophouse and scrounging for food in trash cans.

Caroline begins to have disturbing dreams. Thad can't shake the feeling that his father is coming for him. And Marshall himself is possessed by a "hunger" for his children, specifically Caroline, that drives him on a quest to reunite what's left of his family.

Think you know who the vampire is? Forget it.

In *Bloodlines*, the whole world is a vampire. Violence, drugs, child abuse, AIDS, insanity, political apathy, and greed are just a few of the forces which, according to the story, have been massing together for a final assault against the human race.

Along the way one of the children falls in with a charming child-seller who sees children—especially abandoned children—as commodities which raise his profit margin; another comes to realize that maybe Daddy wasn't all he was cracked up to be; and when the final revelation behind their mother's suicide is revealed, the novel takes a heartbreaking and all-too believable leap into levels of despair not usually explored in vampire tales.

If this is all a bit vague, there are reasons, the biggest one being that the flap copy pretty much blows the Big Secret right off the bat; I strongly recommend that you not read it until *after* you've finished this fine book.

Bloodlines is a thought-provoking, entertaining, and, in its final pages, eloquent conclusion to Williamson's three-part meditation on human suffering, angry but not blinded by its anger, compassionate without being maudlin, and horrific without playing to the lowest common denominator.

Very much recommended.

– Gary A. Braunbeck

***The Circus of the Earth and the Air* by Brooke Stevens (Harcourt Brace & Company, 410 pp, $23.95 ISBN 0-15-117987-5).**

Don't be surprised if you missed this one when it came out in late September of '94; it was pretty much thrown away by its publisher, and the bookstore chains that actually carried it couldn't figure out where, exactly, to put the thing. Was it a mystery? A fantasy? Horror? Literature?

The answer is: All of them and more.

It's a pity that this, Stevens' first novel, did not receive much (if any) attention, for it's a dazzler. This novel unfolds like a sustained dream, vivid, scary, often wise, and always compelling, carried along by Stevens' deceptively simple prose which quickly and subtly grips the reader in its hypnotic spell.

Alex Barton and his wife Iris are vacationing off the coast of New England one summer when they encounter a horse and rider on the beach. The rider invites them to follow him to a circus that is playing nearby. They do, and are surprised to find that the circus has set up camp on the other side of the sand dunes. They don't have enough money on them at that moment to pay for two admissions, and so are told that Iris, who makes a decent living as an actress, will be given free admission provided that she participates in the magician's act when called to do so. She agrees, Alex purchases his ticket (upon which is printed the cryptic phrase *The child will follow*), and they go inside, joining the rest of the large audience.

Iris is called out of the bleachers to join the magician, Father Fish, on stage. He performs a wild, pyrotechnical disappearing act with her . . . only he can't bring her back. Father Fish plays this as a joke, one that everyone, including Alex, enjoys.

Afterward he goes backstage to find Iris, only to be told by the ringmaster and several other performers that Father Fish did not call anyone from the audience. Alex protests, trying to force his way into the performers' tents, and is violently thrown out. After several hours of fruitless searching, he returns to their hotel, hoping that Iris will be there, only to find that her things are gone.

So begins his odyssey, one which takes him into the abyss of suicidal depression as it becomes clear no one in the town remembers a circus being there and the local police think he's crazy. He leaves his job and his home, determined to find his wife, and, aided by a waitress whose boyfriend also disappeared around the same time as Iris, comes across information concerning a Mr. Volenti, a patron of the arts who owns a mysterious island four hours from the New England coast.

Alex journeys to this island to find it guarded by Volenti's private army, who capture him, throw him in a cell, and spend the next several weeks subjecting him to both physical and psychological torture. He finally escapes (after a mind-boggling series of events that culminate in his having to publicly kill a man) and goes to the far end of the island, where "the Mountain" lies. Deep inside this mountain is where the Performers rehearse, and Alex is quickly taken into their ranks.

In this surreal, existential realm of soldiers and strongmen, clowns and contortionists, trapeze artists and animals, Alex sheds his own identity and takes on a new one, as a tightrope walker. As a member of the Circus of the Earth and the Air, he knows it will only be a matter of time before he discovers the fate which befell his beloved Iris. (And his love for her, sustained even through torture and attempts at brainwashing, gives this novel a hard, gemlike core of poignancy).

That's only a part of what happens in this haunting, beautiful story. The cover blurbs make comparisons between Stevens and Angela Carter, and while I can see where some might come to that conclusion, I found this novel read like a cross between Kafka's *The Trial* and Jonathan Carroll's *The Land of Laughs*–it's that kind of book; maybe a bit elusive for some–as it offers only a few concrete answers but implies many more–and an argument could made that perhaps Stevens draws the story's denouement out a little longer than was needed, but such reservations seem trivial once you turn the final page. (I found myself wishing it hadn't ended so

soon—and brace yourself for those last three pages!).

The Circus of the Earth and the Air is the kind of first novel most of us can only dream of writing. If this were a just universe, this book would do for Stevens what *Song of Kali* did for Dan Simmons—but I don't think that's going to happen. The best I can hope for is that, when it comes out in paperback around April, you will seek out this marvelous novel and experience it for yourself. I think it safe to say that its effect will stay with you for a very long time to come.

As a bonus, the Harcourt Brace edition contains several photographs and illustrations culled from the archives of the Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wisconsin. Seeing them, I wondered how it would be possible to capture the gritty, sawdust-covered majesty and mystery of these performers in mere words, but Stevens, a former circus roustabout, does just that.

This book gives you a new world to explore. Find it and go there, by all means.

– Gary A. Braunbeck

***The Totem: Complete and Unaltered*, by David Morrell, Illustrated by Thomas Canty (Donald Grant Publisher, Trade Edition $24.95, ISBN 1-880418-26-6; Signed/Limited Edition $100.00, ISBN 1-880418-25-8).**

This isn't the first novel which the original publisher (in this case M. Evans) wouldn't publish unless it were drastically slashed, later to be released in a complete and uncut version. Stephen King's *The Stand* is the most notorious case, and it is doubtful that King had much trouble talking his publisher into doing it. Put Stephen King's name on the Hoboken phone book, and it would top the *New York Times* best seller list. It was a bit more difficult for David Morrell to see his dream of having the original version of *The Totem* see print. But now here it is, beautifully done and well worth the fifteen-year wait.

The Totem has been called the finest werewolf novel of this century, maybe of all time. And the uncut version may be even better than the originally published one. And yet it is not really a werewolf novel. As the author says, he has "taken the werewolf myth and reinvented it." Folks don't get bitten by wolves and wait around until the full moon to start getting nasty. No one goes through the transformation from man to Chewbacca-type beast, ala *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* and *The Werewolf of London*. Nor do we see them going to all fours like *An American Werewolf in London* or *The Howling*.

But after a bite from one of the hippies from the mountain commune, or one of the infected animals around Potter's Field, Wyoming, people *do* get nasty, and they get nasty real fast.

Police Chief Nathan Slaughter (does Morrell have a way with names or what?) has left Detroit after being shot in the line of duty, because he is afraid, afraid of what he might do as a law officer, and afraid of what has happened and might happen to him. So he goes to safe, secure Potter's Field. And Potter's Field will end up making the Detroit ghetto look like The Vatican, before *The Totem* is finished.

As the narrative begins, Slaughter has been called to a nearby ranch, where cattle have been mutilated. The circumstances are a mystery. Nothing about the mutilated cattle makes any sense, so a carcass is brought into town where, not only the local veterinarian, but the town medical examiner, get involved.

Meanwhile, an alcoholic reporter from a national news magazine arrives in town to do an update article on a hippie commune that was established near the town two decades before. He discovers strange things in the local newspaper morgue. Before it's over a lot goes on in the morgues of Potter's Field.

And a little boy thinks it would be dandy if he could catch a cute little raccoon he has seen at a park near his house. He finds out that the cute little raccoon isn't all that cuddly, and its teeth are really sharp.

And we find out that the police chief and the rancher and another rancher and the reporter and the boy's family and the mayor all have skeleton's in their closets that are going to come out and rattle around.

Before too long the rumors begin to spread that there is an outbreak of rabies in the valley. But the townspeople don't know the half of it. This isn't just rabies, but a new and extremely virulent strain. It attacks the bloodstream rather than the nervous system, so it takes effect in hours rather than days, and it settles in the limbic brain, reducing its victims, after a fugue state which masquerades as death, to a feral and carnivorous condition. And it spreads quicker than molasses on hot blacktop.

As he tries to find out some way to save the town, and maybe the world, Slaughter passes through the horrors of a Gothic mansion, a forest fire, gun battles and a symbolic Armageddon.

But what about the differences between the original and the "unaltered" version? The 1979 *Totem* was damn scary, one of the scariest books I have ever read. It was quick, and it hit hard. The characters were really overshadowed by the power of the plot, which moved like a stampede. The 1994 version takes its time. It is richer, fuller; the characters really come alive. And the description is more vivid. The horror is far more graphic in this year's book, but it lasts longer, and, so, is not quite as intense.

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There is no love interest in the unaltered *Totem*. The publisher required one in the version that was cut. There doesn't really need to be one. The beginning and the end of the 1994 novel are vastly different from the earlier version. They are really two different books, each a marvel in its own way.

There are also major differences between the limited and trade versions of this book. Frequently, publishers just slap in a signature page and throw the book in a slipcase and call it limited, but this is not the way Donald Grant does things. The trade version is an excellent book, cloth covered, sewn and illustrated (black and white). But the limited edition is a piece of art. It is an inch larger all around, set in larger type, with decorated endpapers and color illustrations, all enclosed in a tray-type slipcase. In my experience it is a bargain at $100.

– Mark Graham

***Fires of Eden*, by Dan Simmons (Putnam, November 1994, 400 pp, $22.95, hc, ISBN 0-399-13922-2).**

Dan Simmons has done a lot of traveling for research: from Calcutta for *Song of Kali* to the wilds of Rumania for *Children of the Night*. But finally his wife put her foot down. "Can't you write a novel about some place pleasant?" she asked. And Simmons thought, Why not? Thus, we have *Fires of Eden*, the first (as far as I know) supernatural horror novel to take place in a posh Hawaiian resort.

And *research* is the key word here. I teach a course in classical mythology, and, after reading Simmons' novel, I think I know more about Kampua-a, the eight-eyed hog god than I do about the twelve labors of Hercules. In fact, if there is one criticism I might make of the book, it is that the mythology lessons get a little tedious at times.

Where the book shines, as in all of Simmons' work, is in his deft characterization. No one does a better job of creating a charismatic cast of characters and manipulating them through a tangled web than Dan Simmons.

With the exception of the Hyperion books, Simmons isn't in the business of writing sequels. But he knows that some of the folks who have peopled his stories deserve to be reborn. In this case, from *Summer of Night*, he reprises Cordie Stumpf, the preteen heroine from the wrong side of the tracks. Now thirty-five years have passed, and she has gone from slum dweller to the queen of a Chicago garbage empire. And she has won a trip to Hawaii's most upscale playground.

On the way there she runs into Eleanor Perry, a college professor of 19th century literature, who has her own reasons for spending $500 a night on the South Kona Coast of the Big Island. This unlikeliest of pairs must join forces to save the Islands (and maybe the world) from destruction.

The contemporary story is filled with subplots: Byron Trumbo, the sleaze lord who runs the resort, has his fingers in many slices of the financial pie, but a major part of his capital is tied up in the Mauna Pele, which he is trying to unload to a group of Japanese billionaires; his ex-wife, his mistress and his girlfriend all show up at the resort at the same time as the Japanese; two volcanoes are about to erupt causing devastation that has been unrivaled for over a century; folks who are staying at the Mauna Pele are turning up dead; and a dog with the face of a man, a man with a hump on his back filled with shark's teeth, and an eight-eyed hog are all romping on the beach and golf course.

Then there is the book within the book. It seems that what has brought Perry to the Islands is the journal of her ancestor, Lorena Stewart, better known in the novel as Aunt Kidder, who had witnessed the last big eruptions in 1866, with none other than a young journalist by the name of Samuel Clemens. In fact, the love story in Simmons' novel comes here, and one of the mysteries which much be unraveled is why (because we know they don't) Aunt Kidder and Mark Twain don't tie the knot.

The journal, which takes up fully a fourth of the book (perhaps more), is written in an entirely different style from the rest. It is truly the mark of a master that the reader keeps wondering if Simmons had not discovered Aunt Kidder's journal in some antiquarian bookstore and developed his novel around it. And the tension which evolves from Kidder's tale kept me looking ahead from time to time to see what would happen next.

The underlying theme of the book is the rape of paradise. To be sure, the arrival of the white man spelled the doom of this version of Eden, just as it did on the American continent. And just as Graham Masterton has done with his *Manitou* series for the continental United States, Simmons answers this rape with fire. But, it would seem, fire is not the answer. Even the natives don't want to go back to the old times. Yet the gods do. And the Kampua-a, the eight-eyed hog, is pissed.

I don't think this is Simmons' best novel, but it is a dandy read, guaranteed to keep you turning the pages, and if you ever go on Jeopardy, and Hawaiian Mythology is the final category, you can go for it all.

– Mark Graham

***Nevermore*, by William Hjortsberg, Atlantic Monthly Press, October 1994, 289 pp., $21.00, hc, ISBN 0-87113-579-5**

Back in 1978, William Hjortsberg wrote a novel everyone reading this should be familiar with: *Falling Angel* (if you aren't, shame on you). Since then he's written screenplays for *Angel Heart* (the film adaptation of *Falling Angel*) and *Legend*, as well as some shorter works (which are collected in *Tales & Fables*), but no novel-length fiction. Until now, that is.

While it contains elements of mystery and horror like *Falling Angel* did before it, *Nevermore* is a totally different kind of novel. Watching the multiple layers of the plot peel away is part of what makes *Falling Angel* such a fascinating read. In *Nevermore*, the plot, while intricate, takes a backseat to characterization; you end up enjoying the company of the characters so much that the resolution of the book's mystery becomes secondary in nature.

While a work of fiction, many of *Nevermore*'s main characters are actual historical personages. Set in the early 1920's, its central characters are Harry Houdini, the legendary magician and escape artist (and a well-known debunker of false spiritualists), and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes (a passionate believer in Spiritualism, the afterlife, and other things of that nature). The two become involved with a grotesque series of murders which re-create scenes from the works of Edgar Allan Poe (whose spirit also plays an important part in the novel), the most likely culprit being Opal Crosby Fletcher, a spiritualist who believes herself to be the reincarnation of the fertility goddess Isis.

As *Nevermore* progresses, other famous (or, in some cases, destined to be famous) figures are either introduced as minor characters, or are mentioned in passing. Damon Runyon, W.C. Fields, Buster Keaton, Jack Dempsey, T.A.D Dorgan, Bat Masterson, Ed Wynn, Fanny Brice, and even President Harding, all figure, in one way or another, in the plot.

As you read *Nevermore*, it becomes apparent that Hjortsberg is writing about things he has more than just a passing interest in. Anybody can do research, can dig up the appropriate facts and place them on the printed page. The hard part is making it all fit smoothly so that the influx of information doesn't slow down the story's narrative flow. There's no such problem with *Nevermore*. The settings are perfect, described to the smallest detail, and the characters defined in a manner which is both informative and entertaining. You can't help but learn something when you read this novel; if you're a fan of the period, or magic and/or Houdini, or even Conan Doyle, you'll be in absolute heaven while reading it.

One facet of Hjortsberg's skill as a writer which bears mentioning is his ability to interweave divergent writing styles into a unique, cohesive whole. In *Nevermore* you'll find elements of comedy, drama, literary symbolism, eroticism, suspense, even gross-out horror; there's something in there for everyone, and it all works flawlessly.

One of the most enjoyable books I've had the privilege to read in some time, *Nevermore* is a horror novel for people who aren't afraid to think for themselves. Intelligent, but never pretentious, it's not a book to miss. Don't wait for it to come out in paperback; go out and pick up a copy in hardcover now. You'll be glad you did.

Highest Recommendation.

– Mike Baker

***Fear Itself*, edited by Jeff Gelb, Warner/Aspect, February 1995, 310 pp., $5.50, pb, ISBN 0-446-36539-4**

Fear Itself, the latest anthology from prolific editor Jeff (*Hot Blood, Shock Rock*) Gelb, is a book with an interesting idea behind it, one which is a natural for a horror anthology. Rather than ask writers to come up with stories about horror and sex, or horror and rock music, or horror and possessed kitchen appliances, Gelb asked them to write stories about their greatest fears, about what makes them afraid. After all, who knows fear better than someone who makes their living writing about it?

The 21 writers whose work can be found in *Fear Itself* definitely rose to Gelb's challenge, crafting stories which pack a bit more punch than your standard anthology fare. Even the stories which don't work all that well as pieces of fiction—of which there are a couple—still have an edge to them which make them enjoyable on a different level entirely; you might not totally agree with what the author is saying, or how they're saying it, but there's no denying the feeling behind it. As a result, all of the stories in *Fear Itself* worked for me, even the ones by writers whose work I'm not usually particularly fond of. In my opinion there's not a story in *Fear Itself* which, if I'd been the editor, I would have given the axe to.

Among *Fear Itself*'s tales, I was particularly impressed with Scott Urban's "Victims" (a story I'm sure will be too intense for some readers; you don't get much bleaker than this), Graham Watkin's "Here There Be Spyders" (I've never had a problem with spiders and this story still made my skin crawl; I'm sure it'll be an arachnaphobe's worst nightmare), Graham Masterton's mood-drenched "The Gray Madonna", Nancy A. Collins' examination of how much fun it is to live in the big city, "Avenue X", and John Shirley's "War and Peace"

which asks that age-old question: Whom can you trust?

As horror anthologies go, *Fear Itself* is a definite cut above the competition. There's a sense of honesty to it which I found quite appealing, both in the fiction and in the author notes where the contributors open up about what inspired them to write what they did. If ever there was an anthology which deserved a sequel, it's *Fear Itself*.

Recommended.

– Mike Baker

Quake, by Richard Laymon, St. Martin's Press, May 1995, 400 pp., $22.95, hc, ISBN 0-312-13150-X

Quake, Richard Laymon's latest, isn't really what you'd call a horror novel since, when you get right down to it, there aren't any supernatural elements in it (though there are a couple of sly references made to other genre titles, most notably James Herbert's classic *The Fog*). It's really more of a disaster thriller, albeit one with a bit more gore, violence and breasts (an integral part of any of Layman's books) than one usually expects to find in a work of mainstream fiction.

Quake, as you may have guessed from the title, is about an earthquake, in this case one of large magnitude which strikes Los Angeles early one morning. *Quake* opens with the quake—a neat stylistic trick which immediately draws the reader into the story—then proceeds to show the efforts of the various members of the Banner family (Clint, Sheila and their teenage daughter Barbara) as they attempt to get back to their West Los Angeles home (or, in the case of Sheila, get out of the ruins of her West Los Angeles home). It also follows the exploits of Stanley Banks, the Banner's neighbor, a borderline-sociopath who uses the disaster as a handy excuse to go over the edge and behave in a less-than socially responsible manner.

Laymon's skills at pacing and characterization, as well as his rather twisted outlook on life, save *Quake* from being just another disaster novel. It's a tightly-written, fast-paced book, with more than a few surprising plot twists, characters you care about, and a fair helping of weirdness (like a hairless, leather-clad, barbed-wire belted secondary character with a fondness for discussing karmic repercussions with people trapped in collapsed houses; everything happens for a reason, so if your house has collapsed on you, trapping you in the bathtub, you must have built up some pretty major negative karma).

My only real complaint about *Quake* is that it doesn't live up to the standards set by Laymon's other work. *Quake* is an enjoyable enough read, but in no way does it compare to the inspired nastiness of his earliest novels (like his brilliant debut, *The Cellar*). That sense that anything can happen, that anyone can (and probably will) die, is, I'm sorry to say, pretty much missing here. Twisted though it may be at times, *Quake* can't escape one of the traps of mainstream popular fiction, that being that it's quite all right to torment, brutalize and generally make life tough for your heroes, but killing them is forbidden.

I wish *Quake* had had a bit more of an edge to it. But that's just my opinion; I'm sure that a lot of other people will be more than content with it as it is.

No matter what your ideas about what the requirements for a successful horror (or in this case, thriller) novel are, *Quake* more than delivers. It's an exciting, enjoyable read, one which is, like all of Laymon's other novels, definitely worth picking up.

Recommended.

– Mike Baker

***Safety of Unknown Cities* by Lucy Taylor (Darkside Press, orders should be sent (or phoned in) to Blue Moon Books, 360 W. First Street, Eugene, OR 97401; 1-800-738-2660. Available in two states: Deluxe lettered edition (52 copies), leather-bound in slipcase, $125.00; 400-copy cloth-bound edition, $60.00; both states signed. 354 pp, ISBN 0-94084156-9).**

In 1994, Masquerade Books released a collection of stories by Lucy Taylor called *Unnatural Acts and Other Stories*. At the time, I commented that even though all of the stories in the book were fantastic and displayed an imagination unsquandered on the banal, the shining star was the novella "Safety of Unknown Cities." Taylor's first novel is an expansion of this novella. Under usual circumstances, I am wary of what commonly amounts to novelizations of shorter works because they often seem like bumped up, bloated versions of the refined original. Such is certainly *not* the case here; I like the novel better than the original shorter work.

Safety of Unknown Cities is the story of Val Petrillo, a woman in search of a mythical place known simply as the City, where the border between pain and pleasure dissolves completely, where, quite literally, anything can happen. She engages Majeed, a "natural" hermaphrodite, to help her find the way. Eventually, after a bit of a falling out with Majeed, she reaches the City on her own, but it does not turn out to be all she had hoped for. She must decide whether to stay or to leave; indeed, she must discover if it is even *possible* to leave.

Taylor's writing is filled with a richness of place and a precise attention to detail. When you read the story, you enter the world the author has created, and you feel at risk. You also feel excited.

Though Taylor (and many other contemporary writers) have often been attacked for writing extremely graphic tales, I find it difficult to believe anyone could read *Safety of Unknown Cities* and come away with the feeling the book was written for shock value alone. True, there are many scenes brutal in their descriptions, but the story is not a long string of vile vignettes, each one trying to be a little more over the edge than the other. There is a clear connectedness of plot, a deliberately stayed hand when the characters in question are themselves stayed in attitude or desire. Taylor's novel is *not* a suckerpunch. Rather, it is an elegant unfolding of intense detail, the narrative a careful treatment filled with intimate insight.

Many of us have been waiting a long while for Lucy Taylor's first novel, and finally it has arrived. I find it to be a thorough fulfillment of the promises her short work instilled in her faithful readers. *Safety of Unknown Cities* will surely bring Taylor many new readers, many new fans. For now, Darkside Press has no intention of printing a paperback edition of the novel, so your window of opportunity to own this work is short. Don't put off ordering a copy and take the chance of missing out.

– Wayne Edwards

***The Agonizing Resurrection of Victor Frankenstein, Citizen of Geneva, and Other Gothic Tales* by Thomas Ligotti, Silver Salamander Press (orders should be sent (or phoned in) to Blue Moon Books, 360 W. First Street, Eugene, OR 97401; 1-800-738-2660), October 1994, published in three states: Deluxe lettered edition (26 copies), leather-bound, $65.00 (sold out); 125-copy cloth-bound edition, $25.00 (sold out); 500-copy trade paperback (available April 1995), $10.00, 90 pp).**

This small book is a gem of diversity and emotional derision. Coming from Thomas Ligotti, who would expect anything less?

Agonizing Resurrection is a collection of short stories, almost all leaning more toward vignette than standard short fiction fair. Ligotti's style is perfect for the vignette form, so dense and fluent is his prose. It is the shortest pieces, in fact, that stand out most in my mind.

There are nineteen bits in the book, subdivided into eight sections. The partitioning gives you an idea of what the included stories are about, as with the sections "Gothic Heroines," "The Works and Death of H.P. Lovecraft," and "A Poe Anthology." Commenting on the particular prose events would only lead to certain omission, so it is perhaps best to mention underlying themes that course through the collection rather than plots.

From the psychological perspective, the book relates what it is like to become one's own monster (a monster from within), or, in essence, to become the monster one creates. Emotionally, the recurring themes are loneliness and helplessness, especially in the sense of alienating others by harming them and not being able to control or dampen the destruction you have actualized. In this way, the characters become their own nemeses, and find they are unable to escape themselves.

In general, Ligotti relates images in evocative contexts reminiscent of British gothic romanticists. Each sentence is a trial for the reader's psyche, each paragraph a confrontation with lurking inner demons. Ligotti uses subtle humor in many of the pieces, but it is of the plainly black variety, the kind of quiet joke that makes you twitch more than laugh. The overall effect is not pretentious; instead it is stunning.

Wrought of emotional–and to an extent, moral–annihilation, *The Agonizing Resurrection of Victor Frankenstein . . .* is a book not only for collectors, but for anyone who is willing to be entertained and challenged at the same time. The limited editions of the book sold out on publication, but Silver Salamander released a trade paperback version in April 1995. Priced at $10.00, it is an inexpensive way to acquire some of the more offbeat and satisfying examples of Thomas Ligotti's work.

– Wayne Edwards and Jasmine Sailing

***The Black Carousel* by Charles Grant (Tor, 223 pp, January 1995, $19.95 hc ISBN 0-312-85791-8).**

Charles Grant leads his readers through another tour of Oxrun Station with his latest effort, *The Black Carousel.* The familiarity of the setting works to Grants' advantage. Obviously comfortable with the environment he invented long ago and has refined over time, the author sets a speedy, deliberate pace, safe in the knowledge that readers have at least a passing acquaintance with the setting. Even if you have never read another Oxrun Station novel, you are drawn in and run ragged by the concise narrative. You don't suffer from not knowing Oxrun Station intimately before you pick up this book, but if you *do* know it, the novel is all the more vivid.

Action in *The Black Carousel* is centered around a carnival coming to town, one that hasn't been there for nearly ten years. At the heart of the fair is a black carousel. Subdued yet ominous in the daylight, the carousel takes on a bizarre life of its own when darkness falls. It coaxes the citizens of Oxrun Station into its fold, and transforms their awareness and perception into a poisonous smash of corruptive visions. The result of each en-

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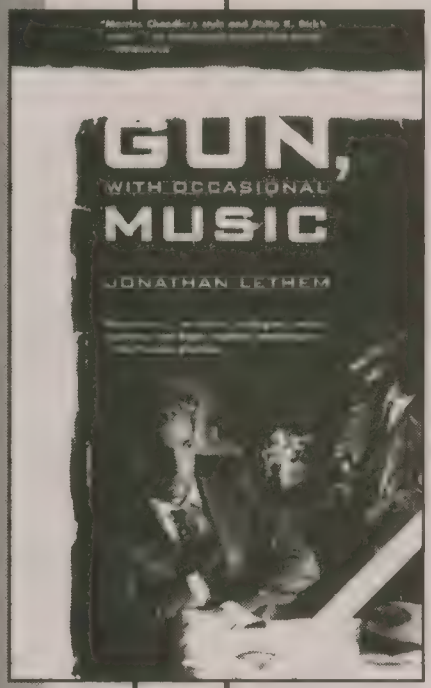

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counter with the black carousel is always compelling and disturbing, makes you anxious to turn the page and discover what fate the cruel machine will deliver next. The characters surrounding the disastrous intentions of the carnival are at its mercy. Because the problems which concern them are ones easy to relate to, the resolution of their conflicts fill the reader with a deep-rooted tingle of impending doom.

Charles Grant has done two things with this novel, both of them confirmations. He has demonstrated yet again his adept command of plot and narrative. There are no superfluous words in the book at all. Trimmed down to essentials, the writing has a punch-in-the-face power to it. Grant doesn't lead you down long rambling asides. Everything he writes here moves the story along in leaps and bounds.

The other thing Grant has confirmed is that he is not finished with Oxrun Station yet, that there are still many aspects to that world he has so far not explored. Rather than being a trivial recombinant resuscitation of events told and retold before, *The Black Carousel* is a completely new story of genuine appeal and merit.

Grant's proclivity for writing disturbing prose is in forceful evidence in his latest novel. His creation is a succinct nightmare you will revisit over and again.

– *Wayne Edwards*

***South From Midnight*, edited by Richard Gilliam, Martin H. Greenburg, and Thomas R. Hanlon, distributed with membership packets at the 1994 World Fantasy Convention in New Orleans (October 1994, hc, no price given, Southern Fried Press P.O. Box 791302, New Orleans, LA 70179, 427 pp, ISBN 0-9642933-0-7).**

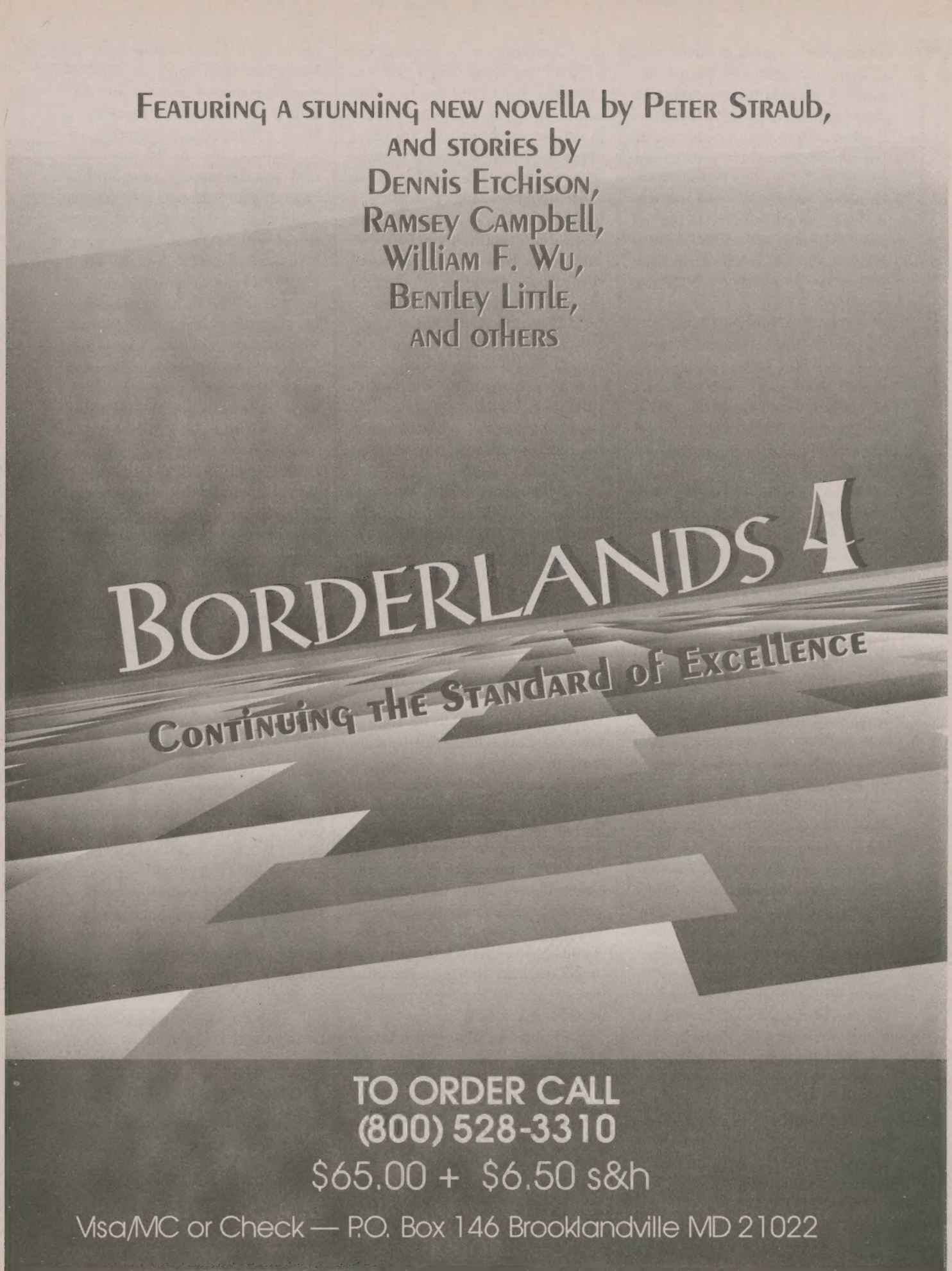
Conventions are expensive—$100.00 memberships, travel expenses, hotel charges, bar tabs—but I go to as many as I can, mostly to catch up with friends I never see under any other circumstances. Sure, the cost is a tax write-off, but still, dropping a grand over four days hurts. One small thing that helps me further rationalize the extravagance of con-going is attendees usually get a couple of free books in their membership packet. Some conventions are better about this than others, but the hands-down winner is the World Fantasy Convention, at which last Fall a copy of an original hardcover anthology, *South From Midnight*, was distributed to all in attendance. No cheesy mass market paperback over-runs here; the convention organizers went all out.

The anthology has a theme, but it is a loose one, so there is no reason to get antsy about the possibility of redundancy. The promo flap of the book describes the collection thusly: "There's a place deep in everyone's heart, a place south from midnight where fears reside and uncertainty colors the sky. A place where darkness is confronted and where desperation can often be found . . . . " Sounds pretty broad, thematically speaking, and the authors take full advantage of the latitude they have been given by the editors.

Thirty-four writers are represented, most of them quite well-known: Joe Haldeman, Douglas Clegg, George Alec Effinger, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Karl Edward Wagner, Poppy Z. Brite, and so on. The best work comes from Lawrence Watt-Evans, whose story "Dead Babies" is a gruesome taboo-breaker about an incestuous country doctor with a peculiar penchant for collecting still-born infants. Another highlight is an excerpt from Poppy Z. Brite's next novel *Exquisite Corpse*, entitled "Exquisite Creep." The story concerns a predator with unshakable nerve who lures young boys to both glory and doom. Another attractive characteristic of this collection is the inclusion of poetry, a literary form often ignored in anthologies. Worthy of particular note are the poetry contributions of Joe Haldeman and Jane Yolen, both highly accomplished poets who are in top form here.

South From Midnight does have some unevenness. A few of the stories left me with a quizzical frown, wondering how they fit in with the rest. But only a few. And the slow points are more than made up for by the excellent work of the majority. There is no ordering information contained in the body of the book, so you'll have to contact the Southern Fried Press to find out whether it is available to the general public in its present state. It is worth the trouble to look into the question because good collections of genre fiction aren't terribly easy to come by, and this is a good one.

– *Wayne Edwards*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